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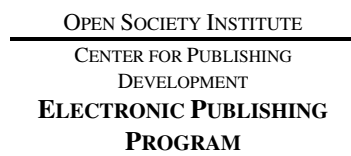
# **INSTITUTIONAL FRAMEWORK AROUND SUCCESSFUL ART FORMS IN COMMUNIST CZECHOSLOVAKIA**



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## ***Introduction: summary of the research work***

**OBJECTIVES PROPOSED** The present project has aimed at examination of the institutional framework built around art production by the Communist regime in former Czechoslovakia. Its special focus has been those aspects of the framework which had possibly contributed to the success of Czech applied arts.

At the time of research proposal writing (1993) I was rather uncertain about how much work the exploration of the institutional structure around applied arts might entail, and neither was I certain of how many types of applied arts it would be reasonable to take into account. Consequently it was not clear to me how much of the ground could be covered during the research period, and whether there would be any time left for the more theoretical explorations. In view of these uncertainties, my minimal aim was to present a report outlining the principal elements of the institutional structure around applied arts in former Czechoslovakia, with some excursions into areas other than that of applied arts.

**OBJECTIVES ACHIEVED** • By and large, I believe I have achieved this aim, though with a number of blanks. On the other hand I managed to expand substantially the theoretical part outlined in the project description (see [Appendix II](#)).

The research results so far have to some extent changed the nature of the problem originally to be addressed. In the project description I presumed that the Socialist institutional framework was *imposed* on the artists against their will. At the same time I argued that some aspects of this framework all the same contributed to the success of applied arts produced under the former regime.

What I came to understand as a result of my research so far is that the Socialist institutional framework - although *enacted* by the Socialist state - was *proposed and designed by the artists themselves* i.e. by their representative bodies (cf. reference to the *Memorandum* document in chapter 5: [The blueprint: Memorandum](#)). The institutional framework erected by the Communist regime was a result of an express desire on the part of the artistic community to marry the future all-powerful Socialist State; this matrimony artists entered of their own free will, admittedly with some anxieties about the future of their artistic autonomy. The re-phrased question I want to address in what I hope to be the second round of my research, is therefore: how did the institutional framework, *designed by the artistic community* and effected by the Socialist state, contributed to the success of some art forms in the former regime? Such fresh perspective makes it possible to see the relation between the artistic community and the Socialist regime not only as one of discord, where oppressed artists fought for their freedom, as the conventional wisdom has it, but also, and perhaps more fruitfully, as a kind of symbiosis between the two.

**CONTENTS** In the following essay I choose to concentrate on outlining the main features of the institutional framework, and its wider economic and political background, and exclude for the time being the presentation and discussion of the successful branches of applied art generated within this framework.

In the chapters of the **FIRST** part of the essay called *PRELIMINARIES* I expand on the conjectures and hypotheses sketched in the project text. The theoretical discussion of this first part is to balance the presentation of historical facts in the second part and put them in wider economic, political, design historical and art historical contexts. This first part opens with discussion of the failure of the Socialist industrial design as against the success of what I term pre-industrial arts. Further the weakness and strength of the Socialist system are discussed, the first being seen in its industrial capacity while the second in its political power to redistribute wealth. Then the contemporary lack of interest in research into the art institutions of the past regime is described and some speculations about the whys are put forward. At the end of this chapter the current heuristic situation and the problem of sources are discussed. The themes and subjects canvassed in this first part will hopefully contribute to making the essay more of a coherent whole, especially in view of a great deal of still missing or incomplete factual information in the second part.

The SECOND PART called *THE FRAMEWORK* traces and describes the central art institutions of the past regime and their basic structure (with varying degree of precision and richness of details) and sketches some aspects of their impact. I was lucky to discover what seems to be *the* basic blueprint for the later erection of the Socialist art institutions: the *Memorandum* document published on behalf of Czechoslovak visual artists in March 1947. The *Memorandum* discussion gives the essay a needed historical dimension, not yet satisfactorily developed in all its parts at present, besides providing a fresh perspective on the institutional framework as a whole. It was new to me to find out that the structure of Communist art institutions between 1948-1989 was laid down not only *before* the Communist coup of February 1948, but that it was in its entirety formulated by artists themselves as a list of concrete demands/proposals. As I suggested above, it is correct to say that it was *the Socialist state* which provided artists with a beneficial institutional framework around art in the former Czechoslovakia, but it is imperative to add that the designers of this framework were the *artists themselves*. This fact seems to point to the conclusion that the artistic community successfully exploited the historical opportunity that emerged immediately after the Second World War in the form of Leftist radicalization, and by appealing to the anti-market, pro-Communist sentiments of the time advanced their agenda. By this and later by working the administrative channels of the new Communist state, artists succeeded during the next 15 years or so in obtaining practically every single item on their original shopping list. (The only exception was creative freedom but even that privilege they came to enjoy, although only by default, and for a short time, in the 1960s at the time of the ideological thaw.)

The income status of artists is shortly discussed in the next chapter, and compared with the average incomes of the population. It is argued that artists, due to the institutional framework erected around art production, found themselves in an income class entirely of their own, with unique earning possibilities.

The discussion of legislative framework is given a chapter of its own, which presents a close look at the central art-related pieces of legislation passed in 1950s and 1960s. It is interesting to note that the most important art legislation was passed in the 1960s, at the time of growing ideological slumber of the Communist watch-dogs.

The main features of the *Czech Fond for Visual Arts*, a key institution of the framework, are presented in the next chapter, and after that some information on the 1960s art export enterprise called (in Czech) *Art Centrum* is given. While the *Fond* can be seen as the key welfare institution of the artist community, replacing market pressures with administrative solutions, the *Art Centrum*, on the contrary, opened the doors into foreign markets at the time when the exchange rates of Western currencies to Czech *koruna* were extremely advantageous for those importing such “hard”, i.e. Western, currency into Czechoslovakia. In both the *Fond* chapter, and the *Art Centrum* chapter many informations are still missing, however, for reasons discussed in the respective chapters of the essay.

Although I have gathered information on art glass and graphic design as representatives of the successful branches of applied art of the former regime I decided against including this material now because it is still too fragmentary. I was afraid that inclusion of further incomplete chapters into the essay, which is in itself in many areas far from complete as far as facts go, would make it look more sketchy than it really is.

## 1. Failure of industrial design, success of pre-industrial arts

INDUSTRIAL DESIGN AND THE MARKET In order to gain insight into the circumstances of success of Czech applied arts during the former Communist regime, it is imperative to start with the failure of the Socialist industrial design.<sup>1</sup>

There is hardly any doubt about it: industrial design definitely did not belong to the success stories of any of the fully Socialist<sup>2</sup> economies. The reason for that is not difficult to find. Under the Communist regime almost all market mechanisms were put out of action, and nearly all economic activity was directed by the government. The systematic attention given to both functional and aesthetic aspects of industrially manufactured articles of consumption and capital wares which the notion of industrial design entails and which became much of a standard in the *Western* industrial production after the World War II, was, however, not a result of a government effort to secure production of functionally and visually attractive goods. With the exception of war time<sup>3</sup> governments of Western countries did not see it as their task to instruct enterprises in what to produce, when, in what amount, what quality, etc. On the contrary, the phenomenon of industrial design is probably best understood as a largely spontaneous by-product of competitive pressures caused by a plurality of independent manufacturers operating in a market economy.<sup>4</sup> Admittedly, governments do have a record of encouraging industrial design. Being aware of the export possibilities of functional and visually attractive products, i.e. of the export contributions to the national economy, governments have contributed from time to time to educational and later promotional framework around industrial design, through establishing design schools, and later organizations such as Design Centers and Design Councils. The important point, however, is that the governments' role in the *emergence* of industrial design was negligible, and that it has remained, at the most, a secondary rather than a primary force. Since the phenomenon of industrial design has been vitally connected to the market economy, its competitive pressures, and a democratic political system, it was hardly surprising that the state-run, monopoly-based Socialist enterprises which viewed all competition, whether between producers of ideas or producers of goods, as wasting of resources, tended to see industrial design in the same way.<sup>5</sup> To use a physiological analogy, the Socialist

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<sup>1</sup> By the term *industrial design* I refer in keeping with the current usage both to planning of industrial production of consumer and capital goods, and to the results of this planning, i.e. to industrially produced objects themselves. Sometimes I use the term *industrial art* as a synonym for *industrial design*. Industrial design objects can be *consumer products* or *capital goods*. By *consumer products* I mean objects such as sewing machines, type-writers, film cameras, motor cars, gramophone players, refrigerators, washing machines, TV sets, deep freezers, video cameras, CD-players, personal computers, etc. By *capital goods* I mean such industrially produced objects as locomotives, busses, lorries, airplanes, tram-cars, various building machines such as bulldozers or cranes, various machine tools, mainframe computers, etc.

<sup>2</sup> The terms "fully Socialist countries" and "fully Socialist economy" were used by the British philosopher Anthony Flew in his article "The Philosophy of Freedom", (1978, 165) to distinguish the countries with Communist regimes from democratic countries with Socialist governments. My term "full Socialism" used in this text is based on Flew's coinage.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Fadden, *The Conscription of Fashion*, 1995.

<sup>4</sup> For a basic information about the emergence of industrial design as activity and profession, see Heskett, *Industrial Design*, 1980, ch. 6; and Gloag, *Industrial Art Explained*, 1945. Cf. also my two articles, "Industrial design and social equality", 1989; and "Regulace estetické kvality a soutez", 1990.

<sup>5</sup> The American industrial designer of the founder-generation, Harold van Doren described in 1940 the role of competition in industrial design in this way: "When a manufacturer has a field all to himself, he can dispense with good design. It is a luxury. But when the field becomes crowded, and the difference between competitive makes becomes increasingly difficult to detect, good appearance becomes a necessity. The smart manufacturer uses every device to gain a legitimate advantage, and design has proved to be a new and potent device with which to squeeze out those last few sales that may mean the difference between profit and loss." Quoted from van Doren, *Industrial Design*, 1954, 16.



economic organism rejected industrial design as a process of making products appealing to the consumer, as a foreign body, which it indeed was.

**PRE-INDUSTRIAL ARTS** In contrast to the industrial art which, not surprisingly, failed to thrive under Socialism, many other arts grew and even flourished under the same Socialist regime. Arts such as music, theatre, ballet, opera, and applied arts such as art glass and studio glass, graphic design, book design, illustrations, photography and even film,<sup>6</sup> and, to an extent, also painting and sculpture, all found in the Socialist anti-market arrangements a congenial, supportive and responsive environment. In stark contrast to industrial design many of these arts came to be highly appreciated on the international market, a phenomenon which was sometimes interpreted by Western observers as an evidence of superiority of Socialism over Capitalism.

It is our contention that the main reason why these arts thrived in the Socialist environment far better than industrial design was that practically all of these successful arts were by their nature *pre-industrial arts*. Was it because the Socialist system was better suited to pre-industrial than industrial production? These arts were either established before the emergence of industrialism or they were based largely on pre-industrial manufacturing methods and individual skills. The artists, in contrast to industrial workers, could still say: “It is *me* who made this, this is *my* product”.<sup>7</sup> The pre-industrial arts were relatively free of the intricate division of labor and the complex market relations that characterize industrial manufacture. In contrast to the Socialist industrial production which was organized into huge entities with monopoly positions, the applied arts which turned out to be successful under Socialism went on being manufactured in relatively small production units, which worked mainly on craft principles and where personal responsibility of the individual artists for the objects produced could still manifest itself. These artists were able to a great extent to control the production process from the design stage through various critical steps to the final product - in contrast, again, to industrial designers, who had practically no control over the production part. Due to a great number of individual art producers, competition among them was never wiped out, as was the case with industrial production for domestic market, and this probably contributed to a kind of natural selection of the best solutions.

At the same time these arts were surrounded by their own tailor-made organizational and legislative structure, which functioned both as an effective trade union (taking good care of its members, mediating commissions, selling the artists’ work on commission, etc.) and as a patronage system.<sup>8</sup> In both cases this institutional framework tended to rule out the market mechanisms or make

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<sup>6</sup> The film art may on the face of it seem to be a stranger in this group of pre-industrial arts but on closer inspection the film production resembles more the medieval *Bauhütte* of cathedral builders than industrial processes. As the German-American art historian Erwin Panofsky remarked in his essay called (in English translation) “Style and Medium in the Motion Pictures” (1995, 119): “*It might be said that a film, called into being by a cooperative effort in which all contributions have the same degree of permanence, is the nearest modern equivalent of a medieval cathedral; the role of the producer corresponding, more or less, to that of the bishop; that of the director to that of the architect in chief; that of the scenario writers to that of the scholastic advisers establishing the iconographical program; and that of the actors, cameramen, cutters, sound men, makeupmen, and the divers technicians to that of those whose work provided the physical entity of the finished product, from the sculptors, glass painters, bronze casters, carpenters, and skilled masons down to quarry men and woodsmen.*”

<sup>7</sup> The inability to claim “*Das habe ich gemacht, das ist mein Produkt*” was according to Friedrich Engels what characterized the Capitalist worker in contrast to the pre-Capitalist (i.e. pre-industrial) one. Engels does not suggest here that artists were among the producers who could still claim that. Cf. Engels, “Die Entwicklung des Sozialismus von der Utopie zur Wissenschaft, 1982, 457; Czech trans.: Engels. *Vyvoj socialismu od utopie k vede*, 1972, 54.

<sup>8</sup> The Decrees 149/1961 and 49/1964 determining that between 0.5% to 3.5% of every public building budget be reserved for art works, can be seen as a form of a permanent patronage instituted by Acts of Parliament (cf. ch. 7 below).

them at least a secondary consideration, in this way screening the artists from direct exposure to market pressures. In other words, while the Socialist economic system, in rejecting the market forces, made life of *industrial* designers pretty frustrating,<sup>9</sup> the regime's - and artists'<sup>10</sup> - common predilection for non-market, pre-industrial solutions and arrangements seems on the whole to have contributed to rejuvenation of the arts of *pre-industrial* nature.<sup>11</sup> In contrast to industrial design, pre-industrial arts were amenable to all forms of sponsorship and patronage.

**SOCIALISM IMITATING CAPITALISM** The above contention is a part of a larger view informing this essay, concerning the nature of the Socialist economic system. To put the contention in a nut-shell, I take Socialism not to be a new *production* system, as its representatives claimed but a new *distribution* system, with only imitative rather than creative production ability.

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On the notion of patronage, see e.g. Alsop, *The Rare Art Traditions*, 1982, 56-60. Cf. also Allsopp, "Patronage and Professionalism", 1993; Hale, "Patronage", 1981; Haskell, "Fine Arts I: Art and Society", 1968.

<sup>9</sup> Milena Lamarova, in her book *Prumyslový design: stroje, nástroje, průmyslové výrobky*, 1984, 7, pointed out that many works of Czech designers did not make it beyond a sketch or a model; they were never put to production because the manufacturers were "*not able to react to the designs in time*". We can add that the reason for their inability to react was obviously that the manufacturers considered design an unnecessary luxury; cf. van Doren quotation above. For the situation of industrial design in the former Soviet Union, see Boym, "Notes from the Underground", 1989, 29-41.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. the section on the so called *Memorandum*; the art-related institutional framework of the Communist regime seems to have been based on the proposals worked out in 1947 by an artist union.

<sup>11</sup> So far I have completely ignored the despotic dimension of this rejuvenation, namely the dominating ideological hang-up of the Communist regime which was the other side of this rejuvenation. This is a dimension which has been in the forefront of discussion of art in the past regime, and for good reason: careers and lives of many artists were ruined when they refused to cave in to the ideological requirements on which the Communist regime insisted in exchange for granting its permission to work as artist and to live of the art work.

The collapse of the Soviet Bloc around 1990 can be said to have born out the conclusions of number of early critical researchers into the nature of Socialism. Since the early 1920s there was a growing consensus among a handful of sceptical economists that Socialism as an economic alternative to Capitalism was not viable. The heart of the controversy concentrated on the claim about possibility of a *Socialist* economic calculation, i.e. about feasibility of a rational economic behaviour in the absence of market economy and money.<sup>12</sup> Analyses of these independent thinkers concluded that the Socialist economic order with its idea of central planning of economic life was not fit to operate under the conditions of industrialism<sup>13</sup> which was a legitimate child of a money based and market based economic calculation.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>12</sup> The Austrian economist Ludwig von Mises, one of the earliest critics of the idea of Socialist economic calculation, wrote this on the subjects in the early 1920s: *"The fundamental objection advanced against the practicability of socialism refers to the impossibility of economic calculation. It has been demonstrated in an irrefutable way that a socialist commonwealth would not be in a position to apply economic calculation. Where there are no market prices for the factors of production because they are neither bought or sold, it is impossible to resort to calculation in planning future action and in determining the result of past action. A socialist management of production would simply not know whether or not what it plans and executes is the most appropriate means to attain the end sought. It will operate in the dark, as it were. It will squander the scarce factors of production both material and human (labour). Chaos and poverty for all will unavoidably result."* Quoted from Mises, *Socialism*, 1981 (1922), 535.

Apart from Mises, also the German sociologist Max Weber and the Russian economist Boris Brutzkus dealt expressly at around the same time, in 1920, with the problem of Socialist calculation, coming to similar conclusions. For a review of discussions around this notion, see Hayek, *Individualism and Economic Order*, 1972 (1947), chs. VII-IX; and Hoff, *Economic Calculation in the Socialist Society*, 1981 (1938). Hoff's survey of the discussion concludes that the so called planning in Socialism boils down to an entirely irrational affair, since without the operation of the market it is impossible to get realistic prices on products and materials, and without such realistic prices no rational planning is possible. This was conformed some 50 years later by one of the planners himself, the Czech 1968-economist Ota Sik; cf. Note 14, below.

<sup>13</sup> The dominant opinion of the time, however, was in favour of the idea of planning of economic life. The American economic historian Peter Boettke argues that *"[t]he Mises-Hayek analytical criticism of socialist planning was hardly understood by any professional economist [in the inter-war period] and in many respects has not been fully appreciated even to this day."* Cf. Boettke, *Why Perestroika Failed*, 1993, 20. Boettke discusses the pro-planning atmosphere of the inter-war and post-second world war period in some detail under the heading "The Poor Preparation for Understanding [of the Soviet Experience]", in ch. 2 of his book quoted above.

<sup>14</sup> An insight into the illusory dimension of the idea of "Socialist commodity production" - i.e. of a market Socialism - can be gathered from the Czech article, in Fingl et al., "Socialistická výroba", 1972. The article's conclusion summarizes what it terms two extreme views of the 'Socialist commodity production': that of the administrative dirigism of the 1950s which rejected the market idea, and resulted in economic regression, and that of the 1960s, which accepted the idea, which, however, *"led to gradual negation of Socialism"* (379). Cf. also Rozental, and Judin, "socialistické vlastnictví" [Socialist ownership], 1955; Kozlov and Pervusin, "Socialistické soutěžení [Socialist competition]", 1959; Solc, ed., "Socialistické soutěžení", 1983.

The reformist economist of the Prague Spring of 1968, Ota Sik, gave in his book *Prager Frühling erwachsen* (1988, ch. 7) this description of the key problems of the planned, i.e. marketless economy (my summary): A business company in a planned economy is not exposed to market competition. The buying power of the company is always higher than the supply. The company always operates in the situation of the seller's market: neither the consumers nor the companies can ever buy for their allocated money everything they need. In such circumstances the production companies can sell everything they offer. The production and commerce companies buy even goods they have no use for, since it is better to have it in the stock than to loose money: at the end of the year all the unspent money is regularly returned to the State. Since producers have no problems with selling their products, *the structure of production is determined not by the market demand, but by the most favorable way to calculate productivity*: in this way companies prefer to produce goods with the most favorable price, without regard for whether there is any need for them. This leads to enormous losses of effectiveness, and to waste of material, energy and labour.

WHAT WENT WRONG The look back at the Socialist ‘experiment’ as something which was ‘genetically’<sup>15</sup> unfit as a production system from the very beginning gives us a fresh perspective on the problems of the past. If we accept this diagnosis, we need not ask any longer why the Socialist economic system performed so miserably. Now the interesting question is rather why the system did not work even worse than it did - or, how it could work at all.<sup>16</sup>

There is no doubt that one important reason why the fully Socialist economies survived as long as they did, was that they existed side by side with the Capitalist economy. The fully Socialist economies emerged only after the Industrial Revolutions of Western Europe and America were accomplished and their results fully established. Consequently the fully Socialist economies had the enormous advantage of starting from the technological and organizational level which had been achieved by industrialism - and which would have been unthinkable without a money-based market economy.<sup>17</sup> In an important sense the alleged industrial achievements of the Socialist economic system were of *parasitic* nature, being achieved by access (sometimes difficult, sometimes easy) to the fruits of the Western money-based and market-based economy and its political system. Although only a fraction of Western consumer products could be obtained inside the Socialist countries,<sup>18</sup> something which entailed limitations on the possible copy-cat activities, enterprises could still find ways to obtain Western products if their production was deemed important from a military, political, or economic point of view.<sup>19</sup> As far as the visual side of design was concerned, the appearance of many Western products could be copied from Western magazines and books. Copies and imitations of

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Sik’s close-up description of the practice of planned economy suggests the reason for inability of the Communist regime to cope with the complexities of industrialism and industrial society. This inability obviously led to a phenomenon which must be considered entirely unique in the history of mankind: a large-scale production, going on over decades and decades, of shoddy consumer goods and shoddy capital goods. (On the abominable quality of products in the former Soviet Union, and on many other consequences of the Soviet attempt to plan economy, see also Roberts, P. C., and K. LaFollette. *Meltdown: Inside the Soviet Economy*, 1990.)

Peter Boettke summarized the reason for the failure of full Socialism in this way: " ... the institutional configuration of collective ownership is unable to provide either the structure of incentives or the flow of information required for advanced industrial production, and thus the material preconditions for human betterment." (From Peter Boettke, "Rethinking Ourselves: Negotiating Values in the Political Economy of Post-Communism", 1998).

<sup>15</sup> The expression is used by the contemporary Prague economist Jiri Texler in his book *Despoticky socialismus*, 1996, ch. IV.

<sup>16</sup> On this problem see Roberts, *Alienation and the Soviet Economy*, 1990, and Polanyi, "Towards a Theory of Cosnpicuous Consumption", 1960.

<sup>17</sup> For a non-Marxist view of the Western economic development, cf. Rosenberg and Birdzell, *How the West Grew Rich*, 1986.

<sup>18</sup> In all Communist countries there existed since the 1950s special shops with a separate currency of their own where it was possible to buy goods imported from the Capitalist countries of Western Europe. This separate currency could be obtained either by buying it for Western ('hard') currency, or on the black market, for the local currency (the latter making the prices some five hundred percent higher than a similar item on the home market). These excessively expensive but still very popular shops were, at least in Czechoslovakia, run by the Ministry of Foreign Trade. Not surprisingly, these exclusive imports played an important role in re-introducing conspicuous social inequality in the midst of the official policy aiming at social equality. In Czechoslovakia such shops were called *Tuzex*, in the USSR *Berjozka* (*Torgsin* in the 1930s), in Bulgaria *Corecom*, and in DDR *Intershop*. They existed no doubt also in Romania, Hungary, Cuba (I failed to obtain the local names), and perhaps even in China and Albania. As far as I know no sociological treatise has been written after 1990 in the Czech Republic about the impact of the Tuzex institution on the Czechoslovak society.

<sup>19</sup> According to an unconfirmed information Soviet Union refused to respect the patent laws of the Western countries, but I have not been able to verify the information. I know positively, however, that a Russian electric shaver named Charkov, exported to other Socialist countries in the 1960s, was an exact copy of the Phillips-made shaver from late 1950s.

Western innovative products manufactured in the Socialist countries created an impression, at any rate inside the Soviet bloc, but also abroad, that apart from minor “juvenile illnesses” the Socialist economic system was not only equal to Capitalism in its effectiveness, but that it was only a problem of time when the Western system would be surpassed by Socialism.<sup>20</sup>

However, the Socialist economic system, to use a home-made simile, had about the same chance to surpass the West as a child sitting on a sledge could surpass its father pulling it up the hill.

The Socialist countries could copy or imitate, at least in theory, any single artefact manufactured in the West - but they were unable, for ideological reasons, to copy or imitate the effective economic framework which made production of such artifacts possible. The economic rationality of the Western system could not be imitated because the whole point of the previous Socialist revolutions was to destroy the very building blocks of that rationality, i.e. the autonomy of manufacturers and the freedom of the market. Since by putting those building blocks back the Socialist system would in turn destroy itself, such steps were ruled out.<sup>21</sup> As a consequence the Socialist versions of products developed originally by Western businesses, turned out almost invariably worse than the original models.

**THE LOGIC OF THE SOCIALIST FAILURE** It appears certain that the general shoddiness of most of industrially produced consumer goods manufactured in the Socialist economies, as well as their low aesthetic appeal, was an unintended consequence of the Socialist goal of abolishing the commodity mode of production. That mode of production, in making products first into commodities before they could be used by consumers, was seen by Marxists as something causing an alienation of man. In order to redress the problem of alienation<sup>22</sup> the Capitalist commodity mode of production was to be replaced by central planning aiming at production for direct use, without the intermediary

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<sup>20</sup> It can be argued that the improvements in the standard of living and the technological ameliorations achieved in the Soviet Union since the 1917 coup, and in the European and other countries since after the Second World War, would be unthinkable without the parallel and continuous economic development and technological innovations of the Capitalist states in the neighborhood, in spite of their periodical ups and downs. In part, also the impressive technological accomplishments of the Soviet military technology within its backward economy can be explained by the fact of having developed simultaneously with the Western military power. Cf. the notion of *reverse engineering*, as the technique of retracing the production process in order to reconstruct the production; see Agres, “U.S. Builds Soviet War Machine”, 1980; and Smith, “The Technobandits”, 1987.

Peter Boettke pointed out in this context that “we must recognize the fundamental distinction between a technological problem – where there is only one unified end considered by decision-makers – and an economic problem – where there are multiple ends being pursued within society. By turning all economic problems into technological problems a social system eliminates the problem of competing ends for which scarce means must be allocated among alternative uses. However, the technological approach to social policy does not allow the experimentation, and the social learning of trial and error that generates the innovations and industrial progress that are vital for economic development. Without sustainable economic development, moreover, military power erodes.” (Boettke, *Why Perestroika Failed*, 1993:154, n.34.)

One can add that the former Soviet Union could probably treat economic problems as technological problems with impunity for so long – and in this way create (a false) impression of great industrial achievement – because it could at all times exploit the parallel Western economic and technological achievements based on market economy, which Soviets outlawed on their own soil.

<sup>21</sup> Soviet officials reacting to the events of the 1968 “Prague Spring”, understood this logic far better than the contemporary or later reformist Communists, such as Michail Gorbachov. They understood that would not the Soviet invasion in August 1968 have stopped the Prague Spring liberalization of Socialism, the result would have been an abandonment of the full Socialism rather than emergence of a (full) “Socialism with a human face”, as the reformist Communists hoped.

For the analysis of Gorbachov’s economic reform known as *perestroika*, of its failure, and of the perils of returning to market economy, see Roberts and LaFollette, *Meltdown*, 1990; Boettke, *Why Perestroika Failed*, 1993; and Skidelsky, *The Road from Serfdom*, 1996.

<sup>22</sup> Cf. Roberts, *Alienation and the Soviet Economy*, 1990 (1971).



commodification of products. The targets of the central planning, however, were formulated in terms of "gross output" which specified indicators such as volume, surface area, weight or number of products. The incentive structure inherent in such gross output system led, however, to perverse production outcomes, of which shoddiness, unsightliness and shortages of products were examples.<sup>23</sup>

The planning authority with its gross output targets in fact replaced the consumer market as the criterion of production success. While the market earlier rewarded producers only in those cases when they succeeded in meeting the wishes of consumers, in a planned economy the producers received premiums and bonuses for meeting the production quotas set by planners, not for manufacturing products that satisfied consumers.

The logic of such central planning incentives led to what was fittingly described as "conspicuous production"<sup>24</sup> (or what can be also called production for the sake of production), i.e. an output which had at best a distant – but more often no – relation to the wishes of final consumers. It was figures and reports formulated in ways that pleased the superior, and the superior's superiors that now became the criterion of production success.

If having met the target becomes the prime (or the only) criterion of usefulness of production, the usefulness of products from the point of consumer becomes necessarily a secondary (or no) concern. The final products end up as grotesque distortions of the kind of usefulness as deemed by the consumers; in worst cases the products turn out to be entirely useless. For example, if gross output indicators for production of nails are set in weight, it is economically rational of the producer to meet the indicator by producing overly heavy nails. If the indicator is changed to number instead of weight, the output assortment tends to be skewed to small sizes. (8) Such solutions are rational and useful from the producer point of view but irrational from the end consumer perspective.<sup>25</sup>

These and other problems encountered by industrial production in Socialism seem to suggest that the Socialist 'command planning'<sup>26</sup> was by its very nature an anti-industrial economic system. The fully Socialist economy was not a post-Capitalist stage of historical development, one that came to replace the previous Capitalist stage of the historical development of the mankind, as Marxists wanted to have it. Rather, it was basically a retrogressive, pre-Capitalist, i.e. pre-industrial system.<sup>27</sup> Here the centralized command structure and a plan-based economic calculation, entirely out of order in so complex an economic system as the industrial one, precluded an effective distribution of the economic knowledge, without which a functioning industrial system could neither have been born nor function today. Not surprisingly, all attempts to *improve* the Socialist system invariably moved it closer to the system it previously abolished, without going so far as acknowledging that the fully Socialist system was based on wishful economic thinking. As a French economist observed already in the late 1930s: "*If one is to summarize the lesson to be drawn from the Soviet experiment, one could say: the experiment was successful where it was unfaithful to its principles; it has failed where it has been faithful to them.*"<sup>28</sup>

<sup>23</sup> Cf. Roberts and LaFollette, *Meltdown*, 1990, 8, 10, 76. See also Sik, note 14, above.

<sup>24</sup> Cf. a short, brilliant article by Polanyi, "Towards a Theory of Conspicuous Production", 1960.

<sup>25</sup> Roberts and LaFollette 1990 argued in fact that "*Production in the Soviet Union frequently amounts to destroying the original value of the inputs. In the West, we say that the production process adds value to materials. But in the Soviet Union the opposite is often the case. Perfectly good prime materials such as steel, aluminium, and other metals go into producing household appliances that are so poorly made that they cannot be used. Soviet-made goods are virtually worthless on the world market, and the country must export primary commodities such as petroleum, gold and diamonds to earn foreign exchange. Useless production is the norm in the Soviet Union.*" (32)

<sup>26</sup> A term reportedly coined by Michael Polanyi to describe the nature of central planning, according to Gouriet, "Freedom and Enterprise", 1978, 35.

<sup>27</sup> In describing the main features of Socialist visions as well as of the Socialist practice, critics of Socialism seem to use spontaneously expressions all of which point to the pre-Capitalist societies, i.e. "serfdom" (Hayek's

In view of what has been said so far it is hardly surprising that one of the areas where the Socialist industrial design did achieve a modicum of success was in connection with *exports* to non-Socialist countries. Here the Socialist producers could not help facing competition, i.e. a factor practically wiped out from the domestic market, since (as the Marxist economists explained) in order not to waste resources<sup>29</sup> through competition with each other the producers were given a monopoly

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*Road to Serfdom*, 1969 (1944); “caste society” of Soviet Union; Soviet economy as a “syndicate” or “ultramonomopoly” or as a “mercantilist state” and Party secretaries as “feudal lords” (for these characteristics, see Boettke 1993:71, 69, 70, 156).

<sup>28</sup> Louis Rougier as quoted in Hoff, *Economic Calculation in the Socialist Society*, 1981 (1938/1947), 350.

It should be added that the Socialist economy was not a monolithic phenomenon. At different times, and in different countries, it was formed by different degrees of dogmatic belief in the command economy, and consequently showed different degrees of abolition of the market mechanism.

In the history of Soviet Union the most dogmatic and never repeated because most catastrophic attempt at introducing the command economy was the series of measures in the period right after the October revolution, between 1917 and 1921 when Lenin nationalized banks and factories, and put the commodity economy, i.e. the market, out of operation, replacing it with an administrative apparatus to exchange products of the town for the products of the country. “*The nationalizations so disorganized production, however, that output levels plummeted and there was nothing to distribute to the peasants in return for their products. The policy degenerated to outright confiscation in which foodstuffs were seized from the peasants.*” (Roberts and LaFollette. *Meltdown*, 1990, 78.) This attempt to socialize economy, known later as “war Communism”, was followed, in 1921 the by the attempt to revive the market under the name of the “New Economic Policy”. While Stalin returned to socialization of economy again, Krushchev, and later reformers attempted to give more room to the market mechanisms.

The American economist G. Grossman commenting on the state of affairs in the Soviet economy of the 1960s singled out four of its areas where market mechanism did operate. The fact that the dogmatic rejection of market was never practiced fully, combined perhaps with inability to control completely all market phenomena, may be another of the economic explanations why the Socialist system did survive for so long (beside the copycat activity mentioned earlier): “*In at least four instances in the Soviet economy, the market mechanism plays a predominant role: in the deployment of labor among jobs (especially after the de facto, and, later, de jure abolition of Stalin's worst anti-labor measures); in the distribution, though typically not the production, of consumer goods; in a part of the production and distribution of farm products on both private and collective account; and in certain minor, interstitial activities outside of agriculture, both legal (privately furnished services of physicians or tutors, some art) and illegal. All these instances refer to relatively short-term decisions.*” (Grossman, “Gold and the Sword”, 1966, 207.) Cf. also Berliner, “The Economics of Overtaking and Surpassing”, 1966; and Levine, “Pressure and Planning in the Soviet Economy”, 1966.

<sup>29</sup> It seems that the idea of an entirely rational, “wasteless” economy which is the very heart of the Socialist economic thinking, had an analogy in the idea of rational, “wasteless” design aesthetics. Such ideas apparently informed the official design theory in the Socialist Czechoslovakia in the 1960s. A Czech art critic Alexej Kusak wrote for example in 1960 that “*Only the Socialist mode of production can afford to manufacture solely beautiful commodities ...*” [“*Teprve socialistická výroba si muze dovolit vyrabet jenom krasne zbozi ...*”, reading into the Socialist mode of production, it seems, the inter-war functionalist design doctrine of identity of functional and aesthetic solutions. Cf. Alexej Kusák, “Hledani ztracene krasy”, In Kusak et al. *O uzitém umení*, 1960, 35. (For a short critical discussion of the idea of wasteless perfection, see my article “On the Rumor of Functional Perfection”, 1991; or its Slovak translation, “Myslienka funkcej dokonalosti: o povahe veci, designe, ekológii a funkcionalizme I & II”, 1994.

It should be pointed out that for the orthodox Marxists, as well as Leninists and Stalinists the above quoted idea of a Socialist production of beautiful *commodities* was an abomination, as the very point of struggle for the “Socialist mode of production” was elimination of the *commodity* production as such, and institution of a system of production for direct use. Stalin was unequivocal on this point as late as 1952, even though he, just as Lenin before him, had approved provisional existence of commodity production in Socialism. Stalin wrote: “[Elimination of commodity production] *would require an immense increase in goods allocated by the town to the country, and it would therefore have to be introduced without any particular hurry, and only as the products of the town multiply. But it must be introduced unswervingly and unhesitatingly, step by step contracting the sphere of operation of commodity circulation and widening the sphere of operation of product exchange.*” (Quoted after Boettke 1993:156; the quotation comes from Stalin, *Economic Problems of Socialism in the*

position in their own branches. As already suggested, it was mainly due to the *extraneous* factor of export which undermined their monopoly standing, that industrial products of Socialist companies sometimes managed to come up to the Western standards.<sup>30</sup>

To sum up the present chapter on the industrial vs. pre-industrial arts: The reason why there was very little successful industrial design in the Socialist countries - or rather, why too many of first-class ideas, and many gifted designers never made it farther than to a model or perhaps a prototype<sup>31</sup> - was because industrial design was a part and parcel of an alien economic system based on market freedom and economic autonomy of manufacturers. The Socialist economic system, however, categorically rejected the money-based economic calculation, and abolished the autonomy of producers - while passionately embracing the industrial system of production. Not surprisingly, the subsequent marriage of the two was riddled with grave conjugal difficulties, and ended with demise of the partner who forced the marriage. In Czechoslovakia the industrial system, married against its will to Socialism, barely survived the wedlock.

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USSR, 1952 (or Czech translation: *Ekonomické problémy socialismu v SSSR*, 1952). On the idea of elimination of commodity production as the gist of the Marxist vision of an alienation-free Communist society, see Roberts, *Alienation and the Soviet Economy*, 1990 (1971).

<sup>30</sup> I read some time ago (but do not remember where) that some customers in the former Soviet Union were able to distinguish between the Soviet consumer goods manufactured for internal use and those produced for export, by comparing production batch numbers; the point was that the export goods, when they for one reason or another happened to be sold on the domestic market, were generally believed to be of a far better quality than the non-export ones.

Among the Socialist manufacturers the former East Germany (DDR) was known, since the 1970s, for fairly high quality of its industrial design. There is hardly any doubt, however, that the physical proximity of the powerful industrial colossus of the neighboring West Germany, plus the common language and improved communications between the two countries, as well as the West German policy of economic leniency towards DDR, played an important part in this phenomenon.

Also the often abysmally low level of services of all kinds in the former Socialist countries can to a large extent be also understood as a result of the abolition of the market economy mechanisms. For a uniquely Soviet way of selling shoes in Moscow shoe shops cf. Kabakov, "Humiliation", 1989; cf. also Teodorescu, "Competition Shoves Aside Soviet-Style Customer Abuse", 1995, for a general improvement report.

<sup>31</sup> It should be made clear that the Communist Czechoslovakia had a rather good industrial design education system, and that many good designers were educated at the department of industrial design in Gottwaldov (now Zlín). But it is an important point that good schooling gives no competitive advantage where manufacturers, due to their monopoly positions, do not need to compete because there is nobody to compete with; not surprisingly, there is little demand for industrial designers, i.e. specialists in delivering competitive advantages. In such situation industrial design tends to be seen by the manufacturers as an economic luxury which there is no point in introducing, since the manufacturers get sold their products even without the contribution of industrial design - and when they do not sell them, nothing much happens anyway since no business is ever allowed to go bankrupt.



## 2. The true strength of the Socialist system: redistributive power

THE MAGNANIMOUS PATRONAGE While the Socialist economy was a failure held artificially alive by political means, the real contribution of the Socialist system was where its real strength dwelled: not in its production capacity but in its redistributive power.<sup>32</sup> It was through redistributive actions that the regime of full Socialism achieved popularity and proved most welcome. The redistribution based a wasteful, malfunctioning and ultimately irrational economic system was bound to lead to a bankruptcy of the Socialist state though the tendency not immediately apparent.<sup>33</sup> The regime instituted many entitlements bound to be sorely missed after its demise, not only in the area of social welfare, but also in what can be called cultural welfare, in the institutional structures established in connection with production and 'consumption' of art.

In the area of both free and applied art, the Socialist government can be said to have functioned as a huge Maecenas, or an enormously rich, powerful - and despotic - patron.<sup>34</sup> The Communist regime made it possible to establish an extensive, magnanimous framework of support for all artists who were prepared to be loyal to the regime, or at least not openly disloyal to it. Severe withdrawal symptoms emerged in the Czech art world, just as elsewhere in the former Eastern Bloc, when in the early 1990s the art support system was dismantled alongside with the Communist regime, and replaced by a far less supportive framework, at least in contrast to the former one.

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<sup>32</sup> The notion of redistribution, and redistributive justice seems to be related to the question of the social (or Socialist) ownership, as well as to the ubiquitous Socialist problem of pilferage.

Probably the very central problem of the Communist doctrine of social ownership was the claim of the regime that the Socialist means of production belonged no longer to private persons, as in Capitalism, but to the 'people'. At the same time the very people who allegedly owned the means of production were not free to use them as they wished. Since the idea of being an owner of something without the right to use it as one pleases was so much beyond any common-sense meaning of the notion of ownership, it can be safely assumed that the idea of social ownership remained an speculative construct, satisfactory to dialecticians but incomprehensible to the absolute majority of populace. Besides, it was well known that the so called 'nationalized' or 'socialized' factories, banks, coal mines, steel mills etc., of the Socialist state, which constituted this common ownership, were gained by the Socialist state through expropriation, i.e. were taken from their former legal owners without giving them anything in return. Those not on intimate terms with dialectical materialism tended to call such expropriations simply theft. Incomprehensibility of the Socialist idea of ownership - that of owning and not owning at the same time - together with the view that the Socialist state acquired its Socialist ownership from its former owners by theft, had obviously undermined legality of the notion of ownership and led to a great deal of cynicism. One of the well-known ideas which versed among the populace in Czechoslovakia, and which can be seen as a summary of the profound uneasiness about the notion of the social ownership, was the popular slogan *'Those who don't steal keep robbing their families'*. It seemed that the idea of redistributive justice on which the fully Socialist states were built tended to work against the Socialist society itself. The notorious problem of massive pilfering of the socialist ownership in the Socialist countries can be seen as the idea of redistribution which people, not quite illogically, took into their own hands. The final demise of full Socialism should perhaps be seen also as a result of its having been hoisted with its own petard.

For the Communist doctrine of the socialist ownership, cf. "Socialistické vlastnictví", 1959, 289.

Unfortunately, I am not aware of any literature treating empirically the problem of pilfering in Socialist countries in connection with the idea of socialist ownership. However, the Czech inter-war economist Karel Engliš in his *Národní hospodářství*, 1946 seems to have given the gist of the problem when he warned in the chapter about "The Consequent Solidarism (Communism)" that *"The consequent solidarism when introduced among egoists by force entails that the strong are not willing to extra performance while the weak tend to raise their demands. The principle 'From everybody according to his ability' (i.e. capacity) and 'to everybody according to his needs (i.e. his objective passive needs) is easily perverted to mean: 'Give as little as possible and take as much as you can.'"* (p.175) The same idea is formulated already in his *Soustava národního hospodářství*, sv.II., 1938, 26.

<sup>33</sup> Cf. Kerschner, "The Inevitable bankruptcy of the Socialist State", 1973.

<sup>34</sup> There the term 'despotic Socialism', coined by Texler as a general characteristic of the Communist regime, seems to fit well: also in this area, the patron, for all his broadmindedness, acted as arbitrarily, obstinately and in

THE NEWSWEEK OBSERVATIONS In an April 1995 issue of *Newsweek*, the magazine's Europe editor Scott Sullivan<sup>35</sup> gave a very well informed and highly perceptive review of these 'withdrawal traumas' at the art scenes of Eastern Europe, five years after dismantling of Communism. In the article called "Artistic Freedom" most of the themes of the present essay were spelled out. Sullivan wrote: *"Five years after the Berlin wall fell, the vast majority of Eastern and Central European artists and intellectuals are flailing in a world that is unfamiliar and, to many, downright hostile."* Sullivan quoted in this context a Hungarian painter, Miklos Stucs, as saying: *"The sad truth ... is that the old system was more comfortable for most artists than the new one. The government bought 52 paintings a year from anyone who had earned an official art degree. The artists could support a decent if frugal lifestyle."* Sullivan added, no doubt correctly, that *"Many did better than that. Along with top athletes and Party bosses, the intelligentsia (including academics and engineers, as well as creative artists) enjoyed privileges undreamed of by ordinary citizens."* Sullivan reported a widespread disenchantment with the new situation after 1990 on the part of the entrenched establishment, in spite of the fact that in some areas, like jazz and rock and roll, the new freedom led to cultural blossoming. *"Artists in their 40s and 50s deplore the 'Americanization' and 'cheapening' of their beloved cultural heritage. Despite the steady erosion of state aid to the arts, they cling to the notion that worthwhile artistic activity requires substantial subsidies, preferably from the public sector. They see the free market as a threat to the high seriousness and social commitment of culture under Communism."*

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the same self-willed manner as a super-rich despot. Cf. Texler. *Despoticky socialism*, 1996. Texler arrived at the notion of 'despotic Socialism' after having rejected other terms currently used to describe the Communist regime, such as 'authoritarian Socialism' and 'totalitarian Socialism'; cf. ch. 1, pp. 12-33. For my purposes the term 'Communist regime' or 'full Socialism' will all the same be preferred, and used as synonyms.

<sup>35</sup> Sullivan, "Artistic Freedom", 1995, 38-43.

### 3. Contemporary lack of research interest in art institutions of the former Communist regime

PART OF ESTABLISHMENT The Newsweek article (see the previous note) is interesting not only for its well-informed and cogent picture of the paradoxes that emerged in the European art communities in the wake of the anti-Communist coups around 1990. It also shows, by contrast, the marked absence of interest among the art and design historians inside the Czech republic in research into the roles of the art-related institutions erected and maintained by the Communist regime and into their impact on Czech art of that era. There may be some benefit in speculating about the cause of this lack of interest.

Admittedly, the problem of the art-related institutional framework of the former regime does receive attention from time to time in Czech newspapers and media, though it is mostly mentioned only in connection with the problem of state subsidies to the present, post-1989 culture. Not surprisingly, it is the Left-oriented press which finds it easier than the center and conservative press to point out this kind of problems at the art scene. Such references tend to be mostly cursory, though.

Among the present established art and design historians, i.e. among the people whose profession it is to view problems in their historical context, the subject of the institutional framework in the former regime tends to be either ignored, or its treatment tends to be sweepingly negative. Such attitudes and judgments, although professionally untenable, are none the less not difficult to understand, if we take into account the logic of situations in which art historians operated in the past and in the present.<sup>36</sup>

In order to be allowed to practice one's trade in the former regime, no art historian could avoid to be, in one way or another, a part of the establishment.<sup>37</sup> Although only few of the members of this profession were Communist Party members (invariably, they occupied leading managerial functions) I do believe that all of us, with the exception of downright dissidents which were very few in this profession, were in one way or another implicated in the system - just as practically anybody who in the former regime had a decent position and a right to publish. Simply to have a specialist position in such closely observed institutions as museums, galleries, monument care institutions, research institutes etc., implied that one had to be, at least on the surface, on speaking terms with representatives of the regime. There were myriads of small things which made one an accomplice of the system, even without being a member of the Communist Party, or without writing in a manner which explicitly toed the Party line.<sup>38</sup> Those who for one reason or another fell into disfavor with the regime, such as those excluded from the Communist Party after 1968, those who signed the Charta 77 petition, or others for various personal reasons, had a choice between either trying hard to appease those in power, or stepping out of the carousel completely. This second choice entailed becoming real dissidents<sup>39</sup> and consequently losing the chance to work in the profession.<sup>40</sup> By and large, art

<sup>36</sup> For the notion of *situational logic*, see Popper, *The Poverty of Historicism*, 1969, 149ff.

<sup>37</sup> Here I am writing as one of the art historians discussed here, in part because I worked for some eight years, between 1973 and 1981, in the former Institute for theory and history of art (UTDU) at the Czechoslovak Academy of Science (CSAV) in Prague; and in part because I do not want my description of the situation to look like as a criticism of my colleagues, as that is in no way my agenda. Rather, the above is meant to be a reflection about the common lot of those who, like myself, were privileged enough to work in the profession in which they were trained.

<sup>38</sup> The American economist Paul Craig Roberts described such lot in this incisive formulation: "*Forced to participate in this system, the individual became chained to one side of himself – 'the dark side' – unless he was willing to spend his life in prison or labor camps or the psychiatric ward. This all-inclusive, claustrophobic debauchment [was] unique to Communist countries.*" See Roberts and LaFollette, *Meltdown*, 1990, 141.

<sup>39</sup> The option of openly disagreeing with the Communist government *without* spending all the dissent time in jail, or downright losing one's life, as a consequence of the dissent, opened only in the political thaw in the years following the death of Stalin. There were no dissidents in the Stalinist Soviet Union because in Stalin time being dissident and being dead was still practically synonymous. Open dissent as a collective phenomenon

historians, as anybody else with a specialist profession which he or she was able to keep practice, were implicated in various subtle ways in the past regime. This is a bitter fact which was a part of a long line of humiliations which the inhabitants of the Communist countries have been so familiar with.

This taken into account, who is there to cast a matter-of-factly look at the period in which we all were implicated? Those who had leading positions under the past regime are either too old or simply retired, and find it hardly meaningful to write open-minded memoirs of the period. Those among the former 'cadres' who are still a part of the present establishment, doubtless prefer to let the sleeping dogs lie. The former "partyless" art historians probably not only feel a great deal of revulsion at the thought of a matter-of-factly evaluation of the Communist contribution, but may sense in addition that a discussion of possibly positive contributions of the Communist art institutions could be easily interpreted as expression of their partisanship for the former regime, and harm them professionally.<sup>41</sup> The few former dissidents in the profession have very probably nothing good to say about the epoch which had ruined their careers, and shaken their lives.

I feel that there are only two categories of researchers which can find such problem interesting. Either the very young arrivals to the profession who were not implicated in the former regime, and who may therefore see the previous epoch with the uncommitted eyes of a social anthropologist; or those like myself, who by virtue of living outside the country feel to be outsiders in relation to the present Czech society. In both cases there is less probability that such interest would be interpreted as an attempt on one's part to whitewash the past regime.

THE DILEMMA OF HISTORIANS in a polarized political situation whether the former Communist one or the present post-Communist one, can be illustrated by two statements by a Czech design historian and specialist on modern glass published some two year apart but in two different political epochs. The first statement was part of an article published in 1989, in what turned out to be the very last year of the Communist regime. In the article written probably a year earlier the writer describes the contribution of the experimental glass studio named Artistic Center [*Umelecke stredisko*] in the glass works in Zelezný Brod to the development of the exquisite art glass production by the now world-famous Czech glass artist couple Stanislav Libenský - Jaroslava Brychtová. In that context the writer says: "*While the birth of art glass in the USA, Netherlands and other places was*

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seems to have been made possible only after the Helsinki 1975 Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe when the Soviet Union accepted the declaration on the observance of human rights in its sphere of influence. The Czechoslovak manifesto Charter 77 document, initially signed by some 250 people, referred explicitly to the international declarations agreed to by the Czechoslovak government. In retrospect the signing of the Helsinki declaration by the Soviet bloc states seems to mark the beginning of the end of the Communist epoch. Cf. entries "Helsinki 75" and "Charter 77" in Bullock et al., *The Fontana Dictionary of Modern Thought*, 1988.

<sup>40</sup> There were however very few such people among art historians. For my part, and in my time, I knew only one, Dr. Ludvík Hlaváček, who after he had signed the Charter 77 document and refused to recant, was expelled from the UTDU.

<sup>41</sup> There is no doubt that the situation is still rather polarized at present (1996) in the Czech republic. This reminds paradoxically of the situation some twenty years ago which I experienced while working at the Institute for Theory and History of Art in Prague. One of the polarizing issues at that time was the status of Karel Teige, a well-known Czech Communist avantgardist who in the 1930s turned Trotskyist anti-Stalinist; Any public reflection about Teige could be conducted only along rather coarse lines: if one wrote positively about him one was in danger that the article wouldn't be accepted for publication; and if it was published, its author was automatically placed among those daredevils who got away with defying the official Communist line on Teige which made him into a Trotskyist enemy of the Communist politics. If one on the other hand happened to criticize Teige, one would be as automatically identified as a supporter of the official line launched and defended by the Communist intellectuals/apparatchiks such as Ladislav Stoll. There was no chance for one who wanted to be critical of Teige but did not want to be identified as a purveyor of the official Teige-line. In that polarized situation, interpretation of Teige was bound to remain locked in an either/or dichotomy. (On the notion of polarization in art, see Gombrich, "The Logic of Vanity fair", 1979.)

*initiated and sponsored by private studios, or art collectors, here [in Czechoslovakia] the sponsor and initiator was, far earlier, our State; through the Artistic Center it provided both work and working conditions.”*<sup>42</sup> This is a matter-of-factly statement slightly colored by the ritual thanksgiving aimed at ‘our state’, and in part no doubt addressed to the Party censors who were presumed to be keeping tabs on both the institution which the writer represented as well as its employees.

Before I quote the second statement by the same author, published two years later, let me add here a short reflection on the perils of writing about art in a polarized political situation. All art historians, whether Party members or not who during the Communist regime wrote about the contemporary or recent art had to keep in mind that the Party watch-dogs might be among their most attentive audience. The texts were therefor expected to give unto Caesar what was Caesar’s. But this created its own problems: since was one expected to drp a compliment to the authorities, it was practically impossible to praise them when one really meant it, unless of course one was a member of the Communist Party. It was therefore natural to shun expressions of praise of any official event, result or institution, even if it was the non-Communist author’s most sincere view; one simply feared that a too positive public appraisal of whatever public event might give the impression that the author was intentionally going out of his or her way to flatter the powers that be, in order to get “good marks” and win a future career advantage. So if a career advantage was not the author’s aim, he or she would refrain from praise since such statement would cause misunderstandings among the friends and colleagues, who as a rule were no friends of the regime. The logic of the situation created by the Party surveillance simply did not allow one to write about the contemporary society in any personal way since it was impossible to get across what one really appreciated and what one really disliked. Whatever one published, by the very virtue of having been given imprimatur in a censorship-ridden society, one’s published views had of necessity an air of an official statement.

Now to the second statement. In the new political situation after 1990, when the state censorship was abolished together with Communism, the same author, discussing the same subject, put naturally weight on another aspect of the situation, writing: “*The most positive factor [in the development of Czechoslovak glass] continues to be the uninterrupted post-war development of Bohemian glass, which the totalitarian regime did not succeed in disrupting to the same extent as other branches of artistic activities. This happened no doubt inadvertently, as a result of a mistaken view that glass represented a purely utilitarian field, and as such was exempt from the necessity of being subjected to ideological and social controls [as in other art fields].*”<sup>43</sup>

Now, as they stand, each of the accounts is right on its own account - both in pointing out the contribution of a Communist art institution, and in suggesting that the uninterrupted development of Czech glass was due to an inadvertent omission of the totalitarian regime bent on disrupting artistic activities. The problem of course is, that each of the statements endeavors to present only one side of the coin.<sup>44</sup> The second quotation appears to suggest that in addition to those who established and run the *Umelecke stredisko* were a kind of good guys while those who did the disrupting of artistic

<sup>42</sup> “*S rustem jejich umeleckoremeslného profesionalismu se rozšiřovaly v dialektické vazbě i realizační možnosti autorské dvojice Libenský—Brychtová. Ve vzájemné spjatosti rostlo mistovství obou stran, potřebné pro spickovou sklarskou realizaci současnosti. -- Iniciativy a role sponzora, kterou v rodícím se umeleckém skle v USA, Nizozemí a jinde sehrála skala soukromých studií, případně sberatelů, se zde o mnoho let dříve ujal nas tat - příležitostí k práci i vybudovanými podmínkami v podobě tohoto [umeleckého] střediska.*” Quoted from Petrova et al., eds., *Stanislav Libenský - Jaroslava Brychtová*, 1989, 11-12.

<sup>43</sup> “Největším kladem dnes zůstává nepřerušovaný vývoj českého skla v poválečném období, který se nepodařilo narušit totalitnímu režimu v míře podobné ostatním oborům výtvarné práce. Stalo se tak jistě spíše omylem, ve falešném přesvědčení, že sklo představuje obor ryze užitek, na který netreba tolik společensky působit.” Quoted from Petrova, “Československé ateliérové sklo - jeho tradice a současnost”, 1991.

<sup>44</sup> Depressingly enough, it seems that just as it was impossible *before* 1990 to point out in public the faults of the past regime, or to say in public positive things about some facets of it, for fear of being identified as a would be Communist, it seems as impossible *after* 1990 to point out possible beneficial aspects of some of the past institutions. largely for the same reason. Cf. note 31 above.



activity were bad guys. This may be so, but the important, and embarrassing, truth is that in both the “good guys” and the “bad guys” were members of the Communist Party. It was the Communist regime guys which allotted money for both the establishment of the *Umelecke Stredisko* and for the disturbances. It was probably an important precondition for the success of the *Umelecke Stredisko*, that Stanislav Libensky, and presumably also Jaroslava Brychtova, were members of the Communist Party. What makes the study of the art and art institutions of the former regime both unique and fascinating is precisely that many Communist intentions we disapprove of did bring positive results, and that in general it proves difficult, and often impossible, to separate neatly the good guys from the bad ones.<sup>45</sup>

THE HEURISTIC DIMENSION OF THE PROBLEM ADDRESSED The mentioned polarized situation, however, has had rather grave heuristic consequences for the present project. The explicit post-1989 consensus among the Czech art historians seems to have been that all works of art of any value created during the Communist regime were created exclusively *in spite of* that regime. My project started with the conviction that the explanation of success of the Czech applied art only by recourse to factors such as the talent, ability and endurance of the individual artists was simply incomplete. For better or worse, works of art are always embedded in a particular historical situation including the art institutions of the period; good works can be perhaps defined as such that have managed to get the best out of that particular situation. To find out whether or to what extent a work of art can be said to have been created *in spite of* a particular historical situation and its institutional framework, or rather *thank to* them, presupposes fairly detailed knowledge about - and insight into - the particular institutional framework. That was to be the aim of my project.

When I was developing the project idea in 1993 I was not fully aware of the dismal state of the heuristic research into the institutional framework around art during the former regime. Besides I hoped some research would have been done and published by others between 1993 and today. I hoped that in my attempt to put together a reliable survey of these institutions, their history and main features, I would be assisted, at least to some extent, by published, ‘ready-made’ sources of information about the making of this institutional framework. This proved to be a thoroughly wrong expectation. My conclusion at the moment is that, at least to my knowledge, practically no heuristic work has been done in this respect in the previous 48 years. In the pre-1989 period there was hardly any no *historical* interest in the institutional structure of that time, obviously because these structures were very much part of the present, rather than of the past; like the Communist system itself, also its art institutions gave impression of having come to stay for ever.<sup>46</sup> But the main reason for the mentioned dismal heuristic situation seems to be the conviction, alive long before 1989, that institutional framework erected by the former regime played only a negative role in the art of the recent past. Ergo, the Communist-built framework was almost entirely ignored by the writers on contemporary and recent art.

AN ILLUSTRATION OF THE PRESENT HEURISTIC SITUATION If a representative evidence of the current lack of interest in the art institutions of the past 40 years is wanted, the two volumes of *Nová encyklopedie českého výtvarného umění* (New Encyclopaedia of Czech Visual Arts) which appeared in spring 1996<sup>47</sup> will do well. This in itself an impressive piece of work has collected an immense amount of historical information, both about individual artists, styles, key notions, terms and various art institutions. From our own specialized point of view, however, the encyclopaedia is

<sup>45</sup> I do admit that my discussion of the two texts is perhaps somewhat unjust; it is notoriously difficult to bring up subtle points in short texts like the ones I quoted from. On the other hand, it may be extra difficult precisely because this problem of good guys / bad guys being often hopelessly intertwined in the past regime has not been discussed enough in public and still remains a polarizing issue in the Czech Republic.

<sup>46</sup> The factual references to the institutional structures of the past, that did appear, were formulated in a practical context, which in the most cases understandably ignored both the historical dimension and structural details of institutions in question.

<sup>47</sup> Praha: Academia, 1995, edited by Andela Horová; marketed in spring 1996.

a colossal letdown. The two volumes of over 1000 pages ignore almost completely the art institutions of the former Communist regime,<sup>48</sup> as well as its central administrative movers and shakers, in spite of the fact that works of art, artists and artistic activities of the past 40 years loom rather large in the two volumes. It is, however, the half-official, unofficial and underground art of the past 40 years, and its institutions and organizations which steal all the attention<sup>49</sup> while all the central Communist institutions and organizations are missing. There are no entries on any object of this study such as *Art Centrum* (art export organization) *Fond* (the visual artists' fund), the notion of *umelecke komise* (art boards) or *Dilo* (art dealer monopoly), *autorsky zakon* (the special tax Act for artists), or the *Marxist-Leninist concept of art* and its institutional repercussions.

The complete absence of such information in a key historical work published more than years after the 1989 coup is one important reason why this study has not come much beyond its preliminary stage. Repercussions of the past institutions on the art of the former regime cannot be gauged when basic information about such institutions is not yet in place.

MY SOURCES Since I have not been able to localize, as of 1996 at least, any *literature* on the subject of my interest, the present essay is based mainly on research into various *sources*. I have to admit that I still don't have a full and reliable grip on either sources or literature on the subject; I presume there are still many sources and perhaps even what can be classified as literature which I have not succeeded to unearth. Still I believe some important groundwork has been done, and I hope very much I will have an opportunity to pursue further the project in a next stage.

A key source for the present essay has been an anonymous programmatic booklet published by the *Central Bloc of Visual Artists of the Czechoslovak Republic* in 1947 and called *Memorandum*,<sup>50</sup> with detailed list of the desired art institutions and organizations designed for the future "popular democracy", i.e. the Socialist state. This document was apparently used as the starting point for formulation of a series of Acts and Decrees issued by the Communist regime in the 1950s and 1960s that laid the legislative foundations for a long line of various art-related institutions which were in operation until the early 1990s. I have presented some of these Acts in chapter 7 (*The legislative groundwork*) below, and a copy of an incomplete collection of these Acts and Decrees gathered during my research is enclosed below as Appendix III (only in the volume submitted to RSS). I received important tips about several such Acts and Decrees from a short anonymous report researched and written in 1995 for the Prague *Nadace výtvarných umelců* (the new post-1989 Artist Union) on the development of economic agencies of the *Cesky fond výtvarných umění* (Czech Fond for Visual Arts) in the former regime.<sup>51</sup>

Rest of the informations presented here comes from various cooperative individuals and was acquired during the past two years (1994-1996), and extracted either orally or in written form as answers to questionnaires. Generally speaking, it was not easy to gather information because of the

<sup>48</sup> Art schools are the only institutions of the past regime which do receive some attention.

<sup>49</sup> The two volume new encyclopaedia obviously intended to fill, understandably again, the recent developments as well as the gaps caused by the ideological despotism of the former regime. A typical absurdity of the period was for example, that an entry on the mentioned Karel Teige was not allowed, by an ukase from the Central Committee of the Czechoslovak Communist Party in Prague to be included in a previous, short encyclopaedia of Czech art published in the mid-1970s, also prepared by the Institute for theory and History of Art CSAV in Prague.

<sup>50</sup> *Memorandum Ustředního bloku výtvarníků Československé republiky o potřebách československého výtvarnictví*, 1947, 22 pages. The above mentioned *New Encyclopaedia of Czech Visual Arts* cites in the entry "spolky" (associations) several artistic associations and organizations which emerged after the Second World War but there is no mention of the *Ustřední blok* which published the *Memorandum*.

<sup>51</sup> Anon. *CFVU a vyvoj jeho hospodarských zařízení v letech 1954-1990*. 1995, 18 pages. I am at a loss whether to consider this document a piece of literature on the subject or still a source. This document, to which I refer in the following as *Fond-history overview*, is the only document I came across which offers a couple evaluative comments, albeit laconic ones, on the ramification of some art-related laws and institutions of the past.

uneasiness and sometimes suspicion my questions arose, especially when these were submitted in a written form. Obviously, providing detailed knowledge about the former institutional structure is felt to be sensitive matter. It seems that unwillingness on the part of some knowledgeable people to share their insight and knowledge about art projects or events or art institutions of the recent past was directly proportional to the sum of money involved, as in the case of *Art Centrum* (see [chapter 9](#); more on the pecuniary dimension of the institutional framework, in chapter 6: “Artists in a(n income) class of their own”, below.)



#### 4. The Socialist idea of art

As already mentioned, in a comment in his Newsweek article<sup>52</sup> on the statement by a Hungarian artist to the effect that “*The [Socialist] artists could support a decent if frugal lifestyle*”, the article author Scott Sullivan remarked that “*Many did better than that.*”

There is hardly any doubt that they did indeed, and there is as little a doubt about why that was the case. The main reason was the impressive institutional framework raised step by step during the 1950s and 1960s around the production of art. We can presume that from the regime’s perspective, the purpose of the framework was to provide generous rewards to those artists and intellectuals who were cooperative - and to make life miserable or directly unbearable for those who chose not to be. The erection of this framework can be seen as a result of a meeting between two different worlds: between the Communist view of the role of art on the one hand, and, on the other, the desire of the artistic community to achieve full organizational autonomy in all things artistic.

In the immediately following sections of this chapter I will give a short review of the Marxist-Leninist view of the role of art; the next chapter will deal with the institutional proposals of the artistic community, aimed at the organizational autonomy, as they were embodied in the *Memorandum*-text mentioned earlier.

**THE MARXIST VIEW** To be sure, the Communist art institutions discussed here did not come into being because the Communist system happened to love art for art’s own sake. On the contrary: the notion of art for art’s sake, referred to by Marxists by the ill-boding term of *formalism*, has been an anathema<sup>53</sup> to the Communist regimes wherever they emerged. Established artists who under the Communist regime failed to relinquish this abomination (or the younger ones who chose to embrace it) could be sure they would be left outside the new Socialist art framework, which doomed them, in most cases, to a pretty miserable life. The regimes of full Socialism had very particular ideas about the nature of art, or rather what it should be like and for. Not surprisingly, these particular, and normative, ideas had their immediate source in the established cultural politics Soviet Union: “*The task of the Soviet art consists in depicting the great constructive process in which a new world and a new man is being born, in showing up the heroism of work and struggle, and in encouraging the masses forward through celebration of the great Socialist present*” - determined one of the art tracts translated into Czech from Russian in late 1940s.<sup>54</sup>

<sup>52</sup> Cf. [chapter 2](#), above, note 35.

<sup>53</sup> A. I. Burov in his essay *Marxisticko-leninská estetika proti naturalismu v umení* [Marxist-Leninist aesthetics against naturalism in art], 1951, minced no words and certainly got his message across when he characterized formalism (before his attack on ‘naturalism’) in this way: “*Formalism in art ... is a disgusting propaganda of hatred towards man, of amorality, lies, cynicism, animal instincts, and of the gibberish of mentally ill, a propaganda conducted by various formalist schools, cubists, expressionists, surrealists etc. (...) The reason why formalism hates truthful depiction of reality is the instinctive fear of the imperialist bourgeoisie, doomed to annihilation by history, of the laws of development of the objective world, as well as the effort of the bourgeoisie to employ art in the service of its heinous designs and turn it into a means of deceiving and stultifying the masses.*” ( 5) Cf. also Sobolev, *Leninská theorie odrazu a umení* [The Leninist Theory of Reflections and Art, 1949; for attacks on the bourgeois ‘pure’ or abstract art, e.g. p. 22, 24. While the 1960s were a period of more liberal art policy, though more due to absence of orthodox vigilance than as a consequence of a different view of art on the part of the Communist Party, the post 1968-epoch of ‘normalization’ brought with it restatement of the anti-formalist orthodoxy; cf. Czech translation of anti-modernist essays by the Russian art critics Lifsic and Rejngardtová, *Krise modernismu*, 1975). In the late 1940s Lifsic was the editor of an extensive selection of Marx and Engels’ writings related to art and literature, under the title *Karl Marx - Friedrich Engels: Ueber Kunst und Literatur*, 1948.

<sup>54</sup> Sobolev, *Leninská theorie odrazu a umení*, 1949, 28.

The ideologues of Communism were aware of the immense power of arts for making the vision, and soon also the reality, of their new social order seem legitimate, as well as palatable to the masses of people.<sup>55</sup> This was no momentous intellectual discovery on the parts of Communists: one didn't need to go further than to the nearest Catholic or Orthodox church to see what art could do to inject fresh blood into the veins of a doctrine.<sup>56</sup> Neither the secular powers could do without the dimension of sumptuousness which in one form or another always been a part of any institution incorporating power, which it was the task of art to provide, as history of both art fashion give ample evidence of.<sup>57</sup> Besides, the experience of the first years of the Communist regime in the Soviet Union showed that young talented artists were flocking in great numbers to embrace the Communist vision. Both before and after the Second World War many artists of idealist bent found the offer to take part in a vision of a better world extremely attractive.<sup>58</sup>

“DIALECTICS” OF THE BASE/SUPERSTRUCTURE RELATION The willingness of the Communist Party to allow, and even encourage existence of a professional group which eventually came out strikingly better off than majority of the population as far as the standard of living was concerned, seems to have its ideological source in a seemingly paradoxical Marxist claim.

It was a central tenet of the Marxist philosophy that even if the victory of Communism is guaranteed (the victory was considered a historical necessity) the Communists must still work hard to bring the victory about. This claim has been derided by some critics of Marxism already before the establishment of the Soviet Union. These critics pointed out that “... *if Socialism really were the inevitable next stage in the evolution of society, there would be no need of a Socialist theory and still less of a Socialist party. Nobody is likely to found a party to bring about spring or summer.*”<sup>59</sup>

<sup>55</sup> A. V. Lunacharsky, the Bolshevik Commissar of Culture expressed it in this way in 1920 that “... *if revolution can impart heart to art, art can give mouth to the revolution.*” Quoted after Dostál, “Rozpětí Lunacarského”, 1972, 289.

<sup>56</sup> Besides, practically all Communist leaders, just like everybody else at that time, received religiously oriented basic education, and some, like Stalin, even went through religious studies to be priests.

<sup>57</sup> Bell, *On Human Finery*, 1976.

<sup>58</sup> An American critic of modernism back in the early 1940s – i.e. some ten years before Communism became the official political doctrine in Czechoslovakia, gauged the attractions of the Communist artistic program in this way: “*On the face of it, Communism would appear to be the most portentous movement in art since the lords of the High Renaissance robbed painting of its holy office and made it the agent of vanity. For we find, on consulting our records, that art, as a living activity, has been united to dominant idealisms.. The great arts of Egypt, Assyria, and Greece, lived and prospered by representing beliefs and convictions shared by large social bodies. The art object - the painting or carving - was a communicative instrument. In calling art to its service, Communism is appealing to that instrument. It has denounced the stupidity of studio art and the empty elegance of schoolmen like Matisse or Picasso (...). It has faced the fact that art cannot live on itself alone, and by making form the servant of meaning, has unconsciously returned to the classic attitude. For the first time since the Christian Church, emerging from the Roman wreckage, employed humble zealots to embody its ideals in stone and color, has the artist been called to a social function. (...) Enters Communism with concepts which would seem to parallel those of the early Church – concepts treated as realities. It has a fine mythology – emanating from Marxian dialectics; and a program, a celestial vision promising universal participation in the good. And it poses the equivalent of the old functioning aristocracies and priesthods in its notion of a dominant proletariat, a specifically favored class in whose hands rests the ultimate happiness of mankind. The set-up would seem to be perfect for the symbolical powers of the plastic arts. And the artist is restless, ready for the call. Intelligent young men everywhere are conscious of the fact that their connection with the polite society which supports art is artificial and dependent on vogues – on fashionable whims capitalized by dealers.*” Quoted from Craven, *Modern Art*, 1940, 357-8. Craven could have probably said similar things about the attractions of the Nazi and Fascist artistic programs.

<sup>59</sup> Quoted from Federn, *The Materialist Conception of History*, 1939, 226-7. A similar argument was raised already in 1896 by a German economist and philosopher Stämmeler in his book *Wirtschaft und Recht nach der materialistischen Geschichtsauffassung*; Stämmeler pointed out that helping to bring about the proletarian revolution which was claimed by social democrats to be historically necessary was similarly absurd as to

However, as Marxists were fast to retort,<sup>60</sup> astronomical phenomena cannot be compared to societal ones. It was true that Marx and Engels claimed that the moving force of history was not a Spirit (as Hegel, the intellectual godfather of Marxism had claimed) but ‘matter’, i.e. the material means of production and the material circumstances surrounding the life of men. It was also true that Marxists summarized their position in the somewhat ritual claim that the consciousness of men is dependent on their material existence (their “being”) and not the other way around. Formulated in societal terms, it claimed that there was a material ‘base’ of society upon which a ‘superstructure’ was generated - superstructure being a term for phenomena such as culture, art, religion, law, science etc. However, Marxists claimed at the same time (or rather from the 1880s on) that there is not a ‘mechanical’ relationship between the base and the superstructure, in the sense that the second is a plain mechanical result of the first, but that the superstructure (art, culture, law, science) in fact acts back on and influences the economic ‘base’.<sup>61</sup>

This was of course a most important reservation - one which veritably turned what would otherwise be an academically interesting philosophy of history into a world-shaking philosophy of revolutionary action. Had Marxism postulated only a one-way influence, i.e. from base to superstructure, there would be no point in, and no need for, any intentional revolutionary activities and actions. History would take care of itself in due course and there would be strictly speaking, no need for a Communist Party to bring about the postulated historical necessity. According to the theory of dialectical materialism, however, the historical necessity cannot act ‘on its own’; it acts ‘through people’, it needs masses as instruments to act through, in order to bring about the new epoch. Dialectical materialism claims that the historical victory of the proletariat and establishment of Communism, although inevitable and secured, can be both precipitated and slowed down.<sup>62</sup> It is therefore necessary to push in the progressive direction, to counteract regressive developments, to prepare the masses for the revolutionary struggle, to keep the revolutionary flame burning.

Exactly this is seen by Marxists as the prime task of art. Being a part of the superstructure its task is to prepare the masses for the coming struggle, and after the final victory, art is to consolidate the results by further pro-Socialist educational and aesthetic influence on the masses. The Socialist art was to differ radically from the decadent bourgeois art characterized allegedly by absence of ideas and by interest only in either pure form (formalism) or naturalist depiction of reality (naturalism). According to Lenin the new art of the proletariat was to be characterized by its “*commitment to the*

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establish a political party to bring about an astronomically necessary eclipse of the moon. On Stammer, cf. Kolakowski, *Main Currents in Marxism*, 1981, 343.

<sup>60</sup> This critique was dealt with already in the 1890s by G. V. Plechanov who considered it refuted it by pointing to the ‘dialectic’ nature of the relation between base and superstructure. Cf. his essays “Plechanovovy poznámky ke knize B. Engelse ‘Ludvík Feuerbach...’” In Plechanov, *Vybrané filosofické spisy* I, 1959; and his essay *The Role of the Individual in History*, 1940. There is no doubt that both Stammer and Federn criticize the Marxist dialectical materialism as if it was a ‘vulgar materialism’ which orthodox Marxists themselves rejected as being ‘undialectical’.

<sup>61</sup> As it was put in a Soviet dictionary of philosophy published in the 1950s: “*Marxism insist on taking into consideration the great role of superstructure, of the state system, law, of political, philosophical and other ideas – in further consolidating and development of the base. It cannot be otherwise since the base really creates the superstructure in order that the superstructure can form and stabilize the base. (...) Superstructure exerts an important influence on the base, accelerating or on the contrary slowing down the development of society.*” Translated from Rozental and Judin, “zakladna a nadstavba” [base and superstructure], 1955.

For one of the few explicit discussions of the relation between ‘base’ and ‘superstructure’ in the works of Marx and Engels, cf. Engels’ letter to Joseph Bloch, in Czech translation “Engels J. Blochovi 21.-22. zari 1890.” In Marx, Engels, *Vybrané dopisy*, 1952, 379-381. Here the rather famed ‘last instance’ formulation is to be found: “*According to the Marxist conception of history the determining factor in history is in the last instance the production and reproduction of real life.*”

<sup>62</sup> Karl Marx says in the introduction to the first edition of *Das Kapital* (1867) that a society that discovered the natural laws of its development can neither jump over, or abolish by decree, any steps of its development, but it can “*shorten and alleviate the birth-pangs*”.

*Communist cause, by its being in the service of the working class, by educating people to fight against every form of oppression, and by its struggle for the new, Socialist way of life, for Communism.”*<sup>63</sup> In the early 1950s another pamphlet translated from Russian and published in Czech formulated the task and meaning of art in Socialism in the following fashion: “*When the Soviet artist takes up his pen, brush or chisel in order to commence with his intention, he has to be constantly aware of the meaning of this great struggle, which he will take part in through his future work. Every work of art faithful to guiding principles and truly artistic which the artist creates, whether it be a book, a picture, a sculpture or a film, is another victorious battle in the ideological struggle against the camp of imperialist reaction, and another achievement in the great work of building the Communist society.*”<sup>64</sup>

The next chapter of the present essay describes the content of a document written by artists themselves, which proposed a system of autonomous artistic organizations and institutions. This text, published in 1947, less than two years after the end of the Second World War, became the blueprint for the future structure of the visual art institutions erected during the Communist regime.

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<sup>63</sup> Cf. Rozental and Judin, *Strucny filosoficky slovník*, 1955, entry ‘umení’ [art], 517ff.

<sup>64</sup> Translated after Burov, *Marxisticko-leninská estetika proti naturalismu v umění* [Marxist-leninist aesthetics against naturalism in art], 1951, 44.

## 5. The blueprint: Memorandum <sup>65</sup>

In March 1947 a brochure of 22 pages with a title *Memorandum of the Central Bloc of Visual Artists of the Czechoslovak Republic On the Needs of Czechoslovak Visual Arts* <sup>66</sup> was published in Prague, almost a full year before the February Communist coup of 1948. The brochure informs that it was written on behalf of the *Central Bloc* but the authors of the text were not given. It was addressed “*To the President of the Czechoslovak Republic, to Members of the Government and to Members of the Constitutive National Assembly*”. Not only the date of publication, but also the high articulateness of the document, and the practical concreteness with which the proposals were worked out, suggest that the Czechoslovak artists were poised to embrace the Socialist objective and the Socialist organization of artistic life - and to take a full advantage of the new organization in order to achieve the highest possible degree of social security and the best possible working conditions. At the same time the authors expressed their hope, although somewhat timidly and meekly, that the new Socialist State would respect their demand for artistic freedom.<sup>67</sup>

This document of 1947 presents a long line of proposals for the institutional framework around Czechoslovak visual art, a framework which was realized almost to the last detail in the Communist era.<sup>68</sup> The text of the *Memorandum* has three main sections: an introductory part, a part presenting a general discussion of the proposed measures, and an appendix part numbered 1 to 4, presenting four fairly detailed law proposals: 1) Proposal for “A LEGISLATIVE NORM AIMING AT PROTECTION OF ARTISTIC PRODUCTION”<sup>69</sup>; 2) Proposal for “A CENTRAL INSTITUTION FOR PURCHASE AND SALE OF WORKS OF VISUAL ARTS”<sup>70</sup>; 3) PROPOSAL FOR “A FOND FOR VISUAL ARTISTS”<sup>71</sup> conceived of as an institution which would function as manager, welfare organization and a loan-agency, and a ‘patronage’ and labor employment agency mediating orders for

<sup>65</sup> The present section concerning the *Memorandum* is based on my own research. The *Memorandum* is not mentioned either in the Fond-history overview, nor in *Nová Encyklopedie...* (Horová, ed., 1995)

<sup>66</sup> *Memorandum Ustředního bloku výtvarníků Československé republiky o potřebách československého výtvarnictví*, 1947 (22 pp.).

For the background information on the *Central Bloc*, see the discussion in the text below of section (3) of the *Memorandum*, concerning ADMINISTRATIVE MEASURES. For its full Czech version, see the facsimile copy in Appendix II, below.

It is unclear to me how large a part of the artistic community the so called *Central Bloc* really represented; my surmise is that it was a large majority but I have no independent evidence to confirm it. As to the authorship of the document, it is anonymous; no names are attached to any part of it.

At this point I do not know who the *Memorandum* writers were. But judging from the fact that the *Memorandum* served as a blueprint for the erection of future institutional structure round production of art in the Communist Czechoslovakia, it is probable that the writers must have been on very good terms with the future key decision-maker in the coming Communist echelons of power. To my knowledge, nothing has been published in Czech, either by way of studies or memoirs, about the mechanics by which politically active artists (i.e. active members of the Communist Party, perhaps placed high in the Party hierarchy, and at the same time at the helm of artist organizations) functioned as a powerful lobbyists on behalf of their trade.

Another important question is to what extent the proposals presented in the *Memorandum* are based on, or inspired by, the knowledge of the art-related institutional framework functioning in the Soviet Union. For my part I have still rather limited knowledge of the Soviet institutional system around art so I cannot say with any degree of certainty whether there is some likeness between the two systems; on the other hand, it seems reasonable to presuppose inspiration / influence from those quarters.

<sup>67</sup> Cf. the concluding remarks at the end of this chapter.

<sup>68</sup> The only institutional exception was the *Art Centrum*; this was not part of the 1947 blueprint - apparently because its authors could not imagine the degree of serfdom the Socialist regime would bring with it.

<sup>69</sup> “Zákonná norma na ochranu umelecké tvorby” (*Memorandum*, pp. 13-14).

<sup>70</sup> “Ustřední nakupna a prodejna děl výtvarného umění” (*Memorandum*, pp. 15-16)

<sup>71</sup> “Fond výtvarných umění” (*Memorandum*, pp. 17-19).



artists in various stages of their careers or career-situations; 4) The fourth appendix was written in Slovak. It was called “PROPOSAL FOR AN OUTLINE OF THE DECREE TO BE ISSUED BY THE SLOVAK NATIONAL COUNCIL CONCERNING SUPPORT OF ARTISTIC PRODUCTION AND ACTIVITY”.<sup>72</sup> This outline of the Decree-proposal includes even Article sections; it is meticulously worked out as far as legal formulations are concerned.

Since *Memorandum* is obviously a key document concerning the future structure of the Socialist art institutions, I will in the following describe its content in some detail.

The introductory text of the *Memorandum* draws attention to the after-war situation of visual artists which is described as critical. It singles out three reasons why it is imperative to discuss the situation of the Czechoslovak visual artists now. As the first reason is given the general after-war economic situation which makes the life of visual artists who depend on the purchasing power of the middle classes and intelligentsia, very precarious. The second reason is described as ‘chronical’ one: it is the problem of an allegedly too little interest on the part of the nation in visual arts. The *Memorandum* claims that visual arts are the least popular among all other arts despite their explosive development in the past decades and their high status internationally. It is suggested that this past development only made the division between visual arts and the backward visual culture of the public deeper still.<sup>73</sup> A comparison is made in that connection between the sums of subsidies given to theatres (Kcs 250 mil.) and the sum earmarked for the purchase of works of visual arts in the budget of the Ministry of Education and Culture (Kcs 3.5 mil.). The third reason why the situation purportedly merits discussion right now is the “*current transformation of the social-political structure of our national community. The visual artists are aware*”, the *Memorandum* authors continue, “*that this transformation will bring forth new tasks for them, for which they are not prepared by the nature of their work until now. Above all, there will probably be less need for works of intimate nature, addressed to the wishes of specially interested individuals and needs of their private homes, while demand for monumental works aiming at the general needs of the people [in Czech: “lid”] will be growing.*”<sup>74</sup> Then the authors try to express in several uneasy sentences both their willingness to serve and at the same time their unconditional need for creative freedom as artists.<sup>75</sup>

In conclusion the authors plead with “*the state and its enlightened authorities*” [“osvícení cinitelé”] to accept without delay the proposed measures in order to “*save the Czechoslovak visual culture from a damage of possibly immense dimensions*”. These three proposals concern (1) artistic education, (2) economic measures, and (3) administrative measures.

1. THE MEASURES CONCERNING ARTISTIC EDUCATION stress the necessity of introducing the subject of visual art training at the middle school level [“střední škola”], i.e. between the 6th and 8th grade. The authors underline that this in turn presupposes specially educated teachers, at the pedagogical faculties, something which had allegedly been initiated. The authors at this point

<sup>72</sup> “Navrh osnovy nariadenia Slovenskej narodnej rady o podporovaní umeleckej tvorby a činnosti” (*Memorandum*, pp. 20-22).

<sup>73</sup> The point of this remark is unclear to me. It appears the remark refers to the avantgarde developments in the inter-war period which alienated the general public. But in the next item the future Socialist restructuring of the society and its new artistic needs are pointed to. In the Soviet Union these needs were channeled into an anti-avantgarde Socialist Realism. The avantgarde direction would therefore be considered an ideological error, fallacy and heresy. Why should the State be expected to redress problems caused by avantgarde orientation of artists is unclear, unless the *Memorandum* was written without any knowledge of the ideological, anti-avantgarde art policy in the Soviet Union since 1930s. Cf. note 75, below.

<sup>74</sup> *Memorandum*, p. 7.

<sup>75</sup> “*A century and half has gone since the disappearance of the consensus between art and people, and now it is necessary to allow ample time for free development of the new cultural awareness of the broad masses on the one hand, and as free a development of new social awareness of the the creative artistic personalities on the other, so that the new foundations under construction today will lead to a new consensus. Any external intervention would only interrupt and delay this unavoidable development.*” *Memorandum...*, p. 8

bring up the problem of sale of “*quasi-artistic pictures and sculptures*” which are “*mass-produced and permanently damage the cultural health of our people.*” It is suggested that sale of aesthetic works of visual character [“*vytvárna díla*”] be not only licensed, but in addition limited to “*persons artistically trained and reliable*” [“*osoby umelecky vzdelané a spoehlivé*”], or otherwise forbidden. At the same time a special approval procedure is proposed for every case of multiplication of works of visual art. Authors refer the reader to the appendix of the *Memorandum* where these suggestions are already articulated as law-proposals.

2. The section discussing ECONOMIC MEASURES rules out at the very outset the idea (brought up by the authors themselves) that a solution to the economic situation of artists might be solved by introducing state incomes, as there are according to the authors 1,227 painters and graphic artists and 307 sculptors in Czech and Moravian-Silesian lands.<sup>76</sup> It is further stated that there is a significant imbalance [“*znacný nepomer*”] between the production and consumption [“*produkce a konsum*”] of works of visual art, but that such situation is temporary and could be eliminated fairly quickly through appropriate measures.<sup>77</sup> The principal measure proposed to deal with this problem “*in order to regulate this imbalance and to institute a temporary economic protection of visual artists*” is the establishment of THE CENTRAL PURCHASE AND SALE AGENCY FOR WORKS OF VISUAL ARTS [Ustřední nakupná a prodejna výtvarných děl]. This is in fact the first outline of the future monopoly art outlet *Dílo* [‘Art Work’], the purchasing and selling agency of the future *Fond* (Czech *Fond for Visual Arts*). To begin with, the agency would systematically buy “*new and valuable*” works of artists in order to help them “*to overcome the present transition period when they fail to find buyers for their work.*” It is suggested that the state loan necessary for the purchase of art works would “*in the first period*” amount to Kcs 20 mil. annually (for Slovakia the financing plan is said to be somewhat different). This agency would at the same time organize sale of the purchased works of art. In order to promote sales, new sale outlets and new sale occasions were to be created, such as out-of-the-town galleries, the tradition of giving works of art as a reward to individuals for their contribution to building of the state, hire-purchase<sup>78</sup> of works of art, including the possibility of a later exchange for another artwork, etc. The authors claim that the effect of such measure would be singularly beneficial: “*Since this purchase and sale agency would be governed by artistic criteria only, excluding all charitable and other regards, and since the state and public offices and enterprises including the nationalized industrial and financial enterprises would as a rule be allowed to buy art only through this agency, its establishment would be beneficial also in that it would prevent economic and cultural damage caused often due to lack of information in persons conducting this kind of purchase.*” (10)

Besides the proposition to establish a central purchase and sale agency for works of visual arts, the *Memorandum* authors proposed further to establish a FOND FOR VISUAL ARTS [“*Fond výtvarných umění*”] which should serve “*as a temporary assistance to visual artists in special cases*” [“*k dočasné podpoře výtvarníku a některých zvláštních případech*”]. A more detailed proposal for both the central purchase and sale agency and the *Fond* was enclosed as appendix 2 and 3 respectively.

In the rest of the section on economic measures the authors outlined the manner of financing the subsidiary activities of both above agencies (proposing value-added tax on prices of alcoholic beverages, night-club incomes as well as sport tickets as a source of revenue), outlined the principle of how to acquire means for providing every new building with visual decoration of and suggested changes in allotting travel scholarships (no longer mainly to art students or recent graduates but to established artists).

<sup>76</sup> These are the lands covered by the present (1996) geographical area of the Czech Republic.

<sup>77</sup> There is in other words a surplus production which nobody is interested in buying.

<sup>78</sup> Hire-purchase was introduced in the US by Merritt Singer’s sewing machine company as a new way of selling his machines to housewives in the 1850s.

Let me stop here for a while and relate in more detail the proposal for the principle of acquiring financial means for visual decoration of new buildings. This suggestion, just as several of the mentioned above, became namely since the early 1960s an Act of its own, and as such an immensely important source of income for great number of artists under the Communist regime, and perhaps more than any other, one which contributed most to making many artists into the relatively richest professional group in the former regime. The *Memorandum* authors pointed out that until not so long ago, it was a matter of course “*that painter and sculptor took part in all buildings*” [“malir a sochar se podílel na všech stavbách”] but now both of them are excluded from taking part, not because of ideological reasons (as in architectural *purism*) but because of ruthless and anti-cultural thrift. “*It would be therefore fitting to impose duty on all building contractors* [“stavebníci všech pozemních staveb”] *to set aside 0.5% to 1% of the building cost for visual decoration* [“vytvárna vyzdoba”]; *a higher percentage would be desirable for incorporating works of visual art into buildings intended for important public use, such as buildings of some offices, embassies etc, or sport stadiums, spa or recreational areas etc. It would be necessary to include not only the outer and inner decoration of monumental nature, but also furnishing of conference halls, council chambers, club-rooms etc, with paintings and sculptures of intimate nature, something which would be ready for such use in the Central purchase and sale agency. As a matter of course it should be decreed that plastic works of art be included in all projects of public spaces and public gardens.*”

3. The section on ADMINISTRATIVE MEASURES formulates explicitly the central idea behind the *Memorandum*, namely the idea that administration and control in all artistic matters should rest exclusively in the hands of the artists themselves.

Before the authors come to this point they give a valuable information about the background of the *Central Bloc of Visual Artists of the Czechoslovak Republic* on whose behalf the *Memorandum* was explicitly written. The *Bloc*, they say, was created as a representative [“vrcholná”] organization embodying all the contemporary artistic associations [“umelecké spolky”] established both before and after the First World War. The authors suggest that Czechoslovak artists until now did not have any such overall representative organization of their own.<sup>79</sup> According to the text, the establishment of the *Central Bloc* was a result of the initiative of those artists who, during the time of German occupation (i.e. during the existence of the German *Protektorat Böhmen und Mähren* between 1939 and 1945) took part in the work of what the text calls National Revolutionary Council of Intelligentsia [“Národní revoluční výbor inteligence”]. The idea on which the *Central Bloc* was built was according to the authors an idea formulated by this National Revolutionary Council of Intelligentsia and launched in its declaration<sup>80</sup> as point six, and publicly presented on March 27, 1946 in the National Theatre in Prague by the Czech poet František Halas. Here a direct quotation from Halas’ speech followed. “*The public administration of all artistic matters be taken from the hands of bureaucracy and entrusted to autonomous institutions belonging to the artists themselves. [This should be so] both in individual branches of art, and in superior institutions up to the highest places.*”<sup>81</sup>

After this passage, somewhat uneasy formulations follow again, from which one can gather a certain worry about the compatibility of the coming revolutionary epoch with the artistic freedom. The authors write that the *Central Bloc* represents both the “*revolutionary thought of the new epoch as well as the deeply embedded tradition of artistic freedom, tolerance of opinion differences and*

<sup>79</sup> Cf. entry “spolky”, in Horová, ed. *Nová Encyklopedie českého výtvarného umění*, 1995, 776-8. According to this entry all the independent artistic associations existed until 1951 when a law regulating the all voluntary association of people was issued; after 1951 they were step by step dissolved. I have not been able yet to identify the law in question.

<sup>80</sup> No title or date of issue of this declaration is given, though.

<sup>81</sup> *Memorandum*, p. 12. The Halas quotation in Czech: “*Verejná správa umeleckých záležitostí budiz vzata z rukou byrokracie a sverena samosprávnym inštituciam umelcu samotných. Jak v jednotlivých oborech umění, tak i v nadřazených institucích až po místa nejvyšší.*”



*value orientation characteristic for our artistic associations.*”<sup>82</sup> Further, the text suggests that the idea of artistic autonomy is really a part and parcel of the main idea of the regime of people’s democracy that people themselves, as directly as possible should decide about and administer their own affairs. The Czechoslovak visual artists are therefore of the opinion, the text continues, that “*the Central Bloc and its regional bodies as representatives of the Czechoslovak visual arts ought to be established in the new constitution as institutions of public law, and that in this way the Czechoslovak artists themselves are to take care of the Czechoslovak visual arts.*”<sup>83</sup> (Here I am not quite sure, what precisely the authors aim at by the notion “an institution of public law” [“*institute verejného práva*”]). According to a Czech dictionary published in 1933, a public law organizes relations between various state organs as well as relations of these organs to private individuals.<sup>84</sup> *An institution of public law* would then be a *state institution, or organ*. Apparently, the *Memorandum* authors wanted to establish their *Central Bloc* as a state organ - and make this organ a part of the new constitution).

It seems that the very idea of having all decision-making in *all* artistic matters in a society handed over to artists themselves is a very *l’art-pour-l’artist* concept: it suggests that when all comes to all it is only artists themselves who really understand what art is and should be and what it is not. At the same time, however, the artists seem to believe the state will warrant their autonomy. Was it a political naivety, or were perhaps the artists prepared to exchange freedom for welfare? Or were they perhaps Marxist-like believers who trusted that the apparent conflict between the two ideas, between the dependence on the state and the artistic autonomy, could be solved in some “dialectical” manner? At any rate the *Central Bloc* decided that instead of being an independent organ within a democratic state which guarantees the artistic freedom as one among many other freedoms, but does not guarantee the artist’s incomes and welfare, it was better for the *Bloc* to cling to the Socialist State as a kind of semi-official state organ, simply hoping that the artistic freedom would in one way or another fare well in the process.<sup>85</sup>

CONCLUSION As I stressed at the beginning, the *Memorandum* contains practically all the main features of the institutional framework related to the Czechoslovak visual art built under the Communist era - with the sole exception of Art Centrum. This suggests that the *Memorandum* served as *the* blueprint for most of the institutional legislation concerning the visual arts in the Communist regime. For the next more than forty years, until 1990, the *Central Bloc* of 1947 ensured for several generations of artists a level of welfare incomparably higher than what the inter-war artist associations could provide for their members. At the same time, the *Central Bloc* blueprint seems to have

<sup>82</sup> “...*Blok dnes respektuje stejne revolucni mysleni nove doby jako hluboce zakorenenou tradici nasich vytvarnych spolku, spocivajici v ideji umelecke svobody, nazorove tolerance a zdurazneni hodnoty.*” *Memorandum*, 1947, 12.

<sup>83</sup> “...*ze Ustredni blok a jeho zemske slozky jako predstavitel ceskoslovenskeho vytvarnictvi maji byt novou ustavou legalizovany jako instituce verejného práva a ze tak ceskoslovensti vytvarnici maji sami pecovati o ceskoslovenske vytvarnictvi.*” *Memorandum*, 1947, 12.

The authors conclude this section by stating that in case the above measure cannot be introduced in a legal way yet, then all the representatives of state organs, in charge of matters pertaining to visual art are asked to make the work easy for the *Central Bloc*, consult it in artistic matters, subsidize it, and where possible let it alone administer the art matters.

<sup>84</sup> Čakrt, “Právo”, 1933, 267.

<sup>85</sup> This apparent blue-eyed belief in the compatibility of the idea of artistic autonomy with an art union conceived as a semi-official state organ seems to have been all the more startling in view of the fact that attitudes of the totalitarian regimes towards freedom were both well known and widely discussed in public for the whole of the inter-war period as well as in the 1945-48 period. In the post-war Czechoslovakia one could find for example in the works of the Czech economist, politician, and political philosopher Karel Engliš one of the most penetrating analyses of the economic political, legal implications of different political systems. Cf. note 96 below, and Engliš’ works quoted in the bibliography.

delivered the Czechoslovak artistic community right down the throat of a despotic regime which annulled most of former liberties including artistic freedom.<sup>86</sup>

But as so often before, also this historical development had more than one act. In what can be called the act II, later on in the 1960s, when the ideological supervisors of the arts were overcome with slumber, the Socialist institutional framework, now further reinforced with even additional artist-friendly legislation,<sup>87</sup> provided the kind of conditions for the artists which the *Memorandum* writers dreamt of in 1947: now the patronage system seemed to provide both welfare *and* a great deal of artistic freedom. This period, however, was only a lull, though an life-giving one, between two long before- and after- periods when the supervisors were rather wide awake.<sup>88</sup>

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<sup>86</sup> The Communist regime would in due time no doubt manage to make artists to toe the line even without this abolishment of plurality of artistic life which the *Memorandum* proposed. But judging from the *Memorandum*, it seems that the artistic community was in fact looking forward to becoming the state employees. Or was the *Memorandum* to be understood rather as a coup, arranged by the Leftist group of activists among the artists? At the moment I do not know enough about the background to suggest a probable answer.

<sup>87</sup> Did the fact that the most important art legislation occurred in the 1960s have any connection with the mentioned ideological slumber of the watch-dogs? And if so, who were the persons who made lobbying for the art-friendly laws (such as law indirectly providing the artists with between 0.5% to 3.5% of a budget of a public building for artistic decoration) to be passed (see chapter 7, below)? Were they perhaps those official Communist artists ridiculed by the modernist avantgarde, those with the highest positions in the art institutions, who profited most from the artist-friendly laws but who at the same time opened possibilities other artists otherwise never would have? Again, I do not know the answers yet.

<sup>88</sup> There was an important difference between the nature of supervisors before and after the lull: while the early pre-1960s ones tended to be ideological fanatics the later post-1960s ones were much more of ideological pragmatics. (About this hopefully more in the next research round.)

## 6. Artists in a(n income) class of their own

When the *Memorandum* proposals had been turned into real, functioning institutional framework around art during the first fifteen years or so of the Communist regime, the status of the artists compared to the pre-Communist days changed dramatically in two different ways.

(1) On the one hand both their life and their work were now all the time under an ideological magnifying glass. As long as the artists wanted to stay organized they had to submit, depending on the nature of their art, to greater or lesser ideological demands of the Communist Party. Were they not prepared to come to terms with these demands, and still wanted to go on practicing their trade, they were qua artists doomed to a pretty harsh and frustrating life.

(2) On the other hand if they were prepared, in one way or another, to come to terms with these demands, they were well on their way to become members of a financial elite. Not that all artists became rich but the new institutional framework put the Socialist artists, with regard to their earning possibilities, in a class entirely of their own. For those artists who combined talent with enterprising spirit, and who were perceived as loyal to the regime, it was possible to earn 10 times, and in some cases probably up to 50 times higher incomes than the average wage earners in the Socialist state would received per year.<sup>89</sup> Those who earned very high incomes were not necessarily only the politically active second rate artists; it seems that many very good artists and a large majority of good artists profited from the arrangement.<sup>90</sup>

My preliminary conclusion so far is that of all professional groups and trades in the pre-Communist Czechoslovakia of 1945-48, the artistic community was best prepared to exploit the Communist takeover in order to redefine both their professional status and their professional and, not least remunerative possibilities.<sup>91</sup>

**CONTRAST WITH THE WAGED CLASSES IN SOCIALISM** The special framework tailor-made for artists exempted them from the general wage policy in the Socialist countries. According to Jiri Vecernik, a Prague sociologist specialized in wage questions of both the former and present regime,<sup>92</sup> the former Communist regime paid only lip service to the Socialist slogan '*everybody according to his abilities, to everybody according to his work*'. Vecernik claims that in reality the regime followed the practice which according to Karl Marx characterized the Capitalist economy: the worker was rewarded not according to his labor but rather according to the cost of recuperation of the working power of himself and his family. From this logic followed several key features of the

<sup>89</sup> This is, however, difficult to prove by hard facts since data on incomes in the Socialist countries in general (and in the USSR in particular) were almost inaccessible or at least very difficult to obtain, as statistical documents (to the extent they existed at all) had a very limited circulation. Cf. Vecerník, "Incomes in Central Europe, 1995, note 1 to page 1. The access to the data on incomes of artists in the former regime seems to be at least as difficult now as it was before.

<sup>90</sup> I intend to wait with giving examples of artists from both categories; at the moment (1996) my information about incomes scales of artists is still very scarce.

<sup>91</sup> The unique standing of the artistic community compared to the rest of the Czechoslovak population seemed to go back to the mixture of political cleverness, a sense of timing and of good luck on the part of the writers of the 1947 *Memorandum*. At the same time it seems that the institutional frameworks around art in other Communist countries were fairly similar to each other. If that is the case, does it suggest that that all of them followed the Soviet model? Did the *Memorandum* writers perhaps also followed the Soviet models? Or could it be that artists in all the countries later to become Socialist were in general better prepared than other professional groups to take advantage of the arrival of fully Socialist governments? Or did artists, after the Communist takeover, use examples of art legislature enacted in 'brotherly' country to press for a similar legislature in their own country, in this way creating similar structures in all Socialist countries?

<sup>92</sup> Cf. Vecerník, "Changing Earnings Distribution in the Czech Republic", 1995; Vecerník, "Incomes in Central Europe", 1995; Vecerník, "Navratnost vzdelani", 1995.

Socialist wage policy: 1. since there was no price put on labor,<sup>93</sup> there was no need either to distinguish between a manual and intellectual kind of labor; 2. since the work in production demanded more physical strain, it entailed greater nutritional requirements, i.e. greater wages; 3. differences in the educational level were meant only to cover the cost of education and of the income forgone during schooling.

Against this background the earning possibilities of the artists were entirely unique. Apart from the category of artists, there were namely very few other categories of citizens who had any prospect of becoming wealthy. Among these few were (1) highly placed Party members who could acquire both real estate and consumer goods, such as cars, at very low prices through special legislative arrangements; (2) then those who worked abroad such as technical specialists sent to a Third World country and paid in a Western currency (which when converted into Czechoslovak *korunas* could raise up to 500% in value); (3) further there were inventors and innovators who may have lived off the royalties from their successful products; (4) then also some of those who worked in successful agricultural cooperatives.<sup>94</sup>

In part am drawing attention to the potential of the artistic class to become affluent because, as already mentioned, there was only a very limited number of areas or trades which opened for such vistas, and also because the official Socialist policy was that of income equality. But I want to point out these unique earning possibilities also as a factor probably conducive to production of works of art of high quality. There is hardly any doubt either that once the framework was in place, and its pecuniary possibilities were known, the vision of getting far better off than most other people, must have assisted the recruitment of both talented and enterprising spirits among the would-be artists. Besides, it can be presumed that an abundant personal economic situation often contributes to making results better, perhaps by making the artist more broad-minded, by making the work more rewarding, by giving the artist freer reign as to the technical, aesthetic and other possibilities, and, not least, by allowing the artist to pay handsomely to persons critically important for execution of the work of art.<sup>95</sup>

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<sup>93</sup> “The wage bill in the command economy did not reflect the labour force’s share of national income, but was calculated as a residual amount after the satisfaction of all investment priorities, so as to ensure a minimum standard for people, with just a little regard for the Western level (which however diminished with geographical distance [of the Socialist states from Western countries].” Quoted from Vecerník, “Incomes in Central Europe”, 1995, 2.

<sup>94</sup> Personal communication from Jiri Vecernik.

<sup>95</sup> This last theme was shortly touched upon in my Czech article “Dva různé osudy? Umění a design v Československu”, (1998) which endeavored to summarize some themes of the present essay.

## 7. The legislative groundwork

The new institutional framework, referred to in previous chapters, was built step by step in a sequence of special art-related legislation, enacted by the Czechoslovak National Assembly, and based, as suggested earlier, on the *Memorandum* proposals of 1947. The most important of these Acts seem to be (1) the *Act determining the special taxation of artists*; (2) the *Act on decoration of public buildings*, and (3) the *Act on purchase, commissioning and sale of works of visual art*. I am going to describe and comment them in that order.

Ad (1) ARTISTS' AND WRITERS' INCOME TAXATION Before describing the main features of the artist-related taxation, a word is necessary about the nature of the personal taxation in the former Communist regime. On the whole there were four categories of taxation: (A) the usual form was wage tax relating to those working in the state, the cooperative and the private 'sector', that is the majority of population; (B) agricultural tax for workers in agricultural cooperatives; (C) tax from literary and artistic works; and (D) income tax category not included under A, B, or C., such as incomes of craftsmen and small businessmen. Apart from (D) all taxes were collected as direct deductions from the regular monthly (or fortnightly) salary, at the responsibility of the organization which employed the tax payer. The tax amount was based on progressive taxation, which was not to be higher than 20%, however. These calculation gave a so called basic salary tax which was a standard tax for a married person with two children. Depending on the matrimonial status and number of children the taxes were then increased or decreased.<sup>96</sup> With the exception of category D, there was no income tax scheme to be filled every year as has been the case in the Capitalist countries. Also in the case of artists, the organization with whom the artist had the contract was obliged to take responsibility for the tax reductions before the artist was paid.

As the above tax categorization indicates, artists, together with writers, had a special tax system of their own tailor-made for artistic and literary earnings. It was introduced as an Act in 1950 by the Act 59/1950, in Czech called ZAKON ZE DNE 18. KVETNA 1950 O DANI Z LITERARNI A UMELECKE CINNOSTI, (Act of May 18, 1950 concerning artists' and writers' income-tax).<sup>97</sup> The above Act was in force for the next 15 years, until 1965 when it was amended by Act 36/1965. The amended Act was in force for the next 25 years, i.e. the rest of the Communist period, until the beginning of 1990s.

The Act 59/1950 is a three pages long text with 23 Articles. It specifies that the notion of literary and artistic work covers the following: a) literary, recital and lecturing performance; b) musical performance; c) theatre-related activity; and d) activity related to visual art. Here (§ 2) the following fields are explicitly mentioned: "painting, sculpture, graphics, medallery, artistic photography, architecture, industrial design, applied art etc."

In § 5 it specifies further the amount of deduction the paying institution in question is to deduce:

until 20.000 Kcs the deduction is	3%
over 20.000 Kcs until 60.000 Kcs	5%
over 60.000 Kcs until 100.000 Kcs	7%
over 100.000 Kcs	10%

<sup>96</sup> Jaroslav Fingl et al. *Ekonomická encyklopedie* 1: A-N, 1972, 132, entry 'dan ze mzdy' [wage tax].

<sup>97</sup> I have so far no knowledge about the taxation law of the pre-Communist period of 1945-1948, or 1918-1939, or the taxation legislation in the Austro-Hungarian empire of which the later Czechoslovakia was a part until 1918. I believe, however, that there was no special provisions for artists which could be compared to the special law in operation under the Communist regime. My surmise is that artists were in the same category as any craftsman or businessman.

The artist in question, when paid by an institution is automatically deducted so that his remuneration is always a net amount. In the cases when the tax is not collected by the payer, it is the payee's duty to pay the respective tax amount through to the Regional National Committee ["Okresni narodni vybor"] by the 31. January next year.

As mentioned, the above Act 59/1950 was replaced in 1965 by ZAKON ZE DNE 25. BREZNA 1965 O DANI Z PRIJMU Z LITERARNI A UMELECKE CINNOSTI (Act of March 25, 1965 concerning artists' and writers' income-tax), in short, Act 36/1965. The text of the Act is less than three full pages long, and has 18 Articles. It is more detailed in some respect and more general in others, compared to the previous Act.

In the section 'tax liability' the specification of what kind of activity is understood by the notion of 'literary and artistic activity' is different from the specification in Act 59/1950. Article 2 distinguishes between two main types of the above activities, 'creative literary and artistic activity' ["tvurci literarni a umelecka cinnost"] (§2:1), and 'activity of performing artists' ["cinnost vykonnych umelcu"] (§2:2). There is neither any specific mention of the visual arts, nor any singling out of a concrete visual art field, as in 59/1950.

On the other hand, §7 introduced the notion of 'deductible items' ["odcitatelne polozky"] i.e. the items which can be deducted from the fee as costs incurred in connection with the production of a work of art (in the cases when the tax is based on yearly sum of earnings). Here it is determined that sculptors are entitled to a deduction of 60% as costs from the amount to be taxed, while 'works of other art branches' ["dila z ostatnich umeleckych oboru"] (no concrete branches were specified) are eligible for 30% deduction from the earning. The above class of artists are eligible to these deductions *without* duty to specify the real costs. Article 7:1c specifies that 10% can be deducted from all other remunerations due to be taxed. This seems to refer to literary and other artists outside the category of visual artists. In addition, everybody is entitled to deduce the contributions to the cultural *fonds* which artists were supposed to pay from their net income.

Article 7:2 specified further that tax-payers will get further deduction of 6,000 Kcs (per year) as a family allowance for every person they support for whom they had not already received reduction of income tax.

Article 8 determines the tax rates. (It should be noted here that the new rates are practically impossible to compare to the previous ones since in the early 1950 there was the notorious 'currency reform' ["menova reforma"] which devaluated the Czechoslovak currency in a ratio of 5:1 up to a certain amount above which the rate was around 500:1, the aim being to devalue the bank accounts of the rich.<sup>98</sup>)

The present tax rate for artists went as follows:

Until		3,000 Kcs	3 %	
over 3,000	until 6,000	90 Kcs plus 5 %	from tax fundament	larger than 3.000 Kcs
over 6,000	until 10,000	240 Kcs plus 8%	from tax fundament	larger than 6,000 Kcs
over 10.000	until 25,000	560 Kcs plus 14%	from tax fundament	larger than 10,000 Kcs
over 25,000	until 50,000	2,660 Kcs plus 20%	from tax fundament	larger than 25,000 Kcs
over 50,000		7,660 Kcs plus 33%	from tax fundament	larger than 50,000 Kcs

Since by now, i.e. by the 1960s, there were virtually no private employers any longer, there was no need for a yearly tax return; now all taxes were collected directly by the accounting office of the institution paying the remuneration.

<sup>98</sup> On the official view of the reform, cf. Reiman et al. *Dejiny komunistické strany Československa*, 1961, 583-585.



The Act 36/1965 was followed by a “DECREE OF THE MINISTRY OF FINANCE SPECIFYING THE PRACTICE OF THE ACT CONCERNING ARTISTS’ and writers’ income-tax, issued on April 5, 1965. In § 8:1-2 and § 9:1-7 the Decree specified the notion of ‘deductible items’ [“odcitatelne položky”] introduced in § 7 of the Act 36/1965. While § 9:1-9 specified details related to entitlements to family allowances, §8:3 (referring expressly to Act 36/1965, § 7:1b somewhat surprisingly specified *photographic works* as the only “concrete art branch of visual art” mentioned explicitly as those eligible for 30% work-related cost deductions but unspecified under the heading of “Deductible Items” in Act 36/1965, § 7:1b.

Ad (2) PUBLIC ART COMMISSIONS The above Act and Decree was not the only Act that made the visual artists into a professional group with probably greatest number of affluent citizens in the Socialist Czechoslovakia Another enormously important Act in this respect was an Act which secured the artists a steady flow of state commissions. This was provided, also since the early 1960s, by a DECREE 149/1961 (amended by DECREE 149/1964)<sup>99</sup> stipulating that between 0.5% to 3.5% out of every new building or construction investments should be reserved for and devoted to public art works/decorations. Also this Act was proposed already in the *Memorandum* of 1947, in the section on “Economic measures”. Since I failed to acquire a copy of this Decree, I reproduce what was said about its nature and effects in the Fond-history overview.<sup>100</sup>

In buildings devoted to cultural, educational or social purposes the amount went up to 2,5 % of the investment sums, while even a purely technical buildings such as sewerage cleaner building was entitled to have 0.5% for beautification through works of visual art. According to the Fond-history overview this Act led to a veritable visual arts boom by the end of the 1960s, and the summit of this boom was in the late 1970s and early 1980s, as this Decree opened for utilization of art works of almost all categories. It was a well know fact that the officials administratively responsible for the building [“projektanti”], together with architects and artists, were personally interested in utilizing fully the prescribed percentage of the investment in question, also because this provided a unique and ample source of income for all three parts concerned - the architects and the responsible investors receiving unofficially a share from the artists’ incomes. As a consequence the price-tag on a public work of art was never lower than the budget percent amount stipulated for financing it, however large it may have been. The results were often marked by wasteful sumptuousity generated by the effort to spend all the allotted money.

According to the Fond-history overview, the artistic production related to the above Decree was run by a *Fond*-organization called *Vytvarna služba* (Visual Art Service) or *UNAP: Ustřední nákupní a prodejna* (Central purchase and sale agency).<sup>101</sup> This agency took care of the organization of all of the commissions in connection with the Decree 149/1961 and 149/1964. As a manager of such commissions the agency took provision from every commission which was an important source of income for *Fond* organizations. As the Fond-history outline pointed out,<sup>102</sup> all these huge incomes of the *Fond* were generated by purely administrative means, without any need for marketing effort whatsoever.

Ad (3) PURCHASE, COMMISSIONING AND SALE OF WORKS OF VISUAL ART The third important Act determined the legislative circumstances pertaining to the purchase, commission and sale of works of visual art.

<sup>99</sup> According to Fond-history overview, p. 8; I was unable to find this law, possibly because its number was given imprecisely, so I am not sure about its official name.

<sup>100</sup> Cf. anon. *CFVU a vyvoj jeho hospodarskych zarizeni ....*

<sup>101</sup> It is not clear from the Fond-history overview when the name changed.

<sup>102</sup> Cf. anon. *CFVU a vyvoj jeho hospodarskych zarizeni ....*, p. 8.

I have not succeeded in finding out to what extent and in how great a detail these circumstances were regulated before the Act 149/1961 became effective. The present Act 149/1961: “DECREE OF THE MINISTRY OF EDUCATION AND CULTURE OF DECEMBER 12. 1961 CONCERNING PURCHASE, COMMISSIONING AND SALE OF WORKS OF VISUAL ART, INCLUDING SOME OTHER MEASURES WITHIN THE AREA OF VISUAL ARTS” was, however, in operation for the greater part of the existence of the Czechoslovak republic (more than two thirds of the period). For the next 28 years the monopoly measures secured not only the welfare of the artistic community and of the individual artists but at the same time, via full control over the existential conditions of visual artists also the ideological control over their work.

The Decree determined (§1:1a-d) that there are only four instances who can legally conduct sales of works of art:

- (1) the AUTHORS of the works of art or those who inherited such works;
- (2) The Czech (or Slovak) FOND for Visual Arts, and their establishments and organs;
- (3) SOCIALIST ORGANIZATIONS such as national businesses [“narodni podniky”], enterprises of the state commerce, local industrial enterprises and others;
- (4) The OWNERS of such works, unless the sale is conducted as trade.

The Socialist organizations purchasing and selling works of visual art (apart from shops dealing in jewellery, clocks or antiques) were allowed to sell or take into commission only those works of art which they acquired through the *Fonds* (§ 1:3).

The first provision, the right of the artists to sell their own works of art without being obliged to go through the *Fond* institutions opened for an important fringe benefit for the artists. Although they were obliged to have the incomes from their private studio sales taxed, this rule was in practice never checked, and purportedly never observed. According to all my sources, the usual practice was that what artists sold in their studios or in any private way became a tax-free income. Although an artist's incomes through such sales were probably not very large this was obviously one more perk of being an artist under Socialism.



## 8. Key institution: the Fond

The establishment of the *Czech Fond for Visual Arts* (further only the *Fond*) can be seen as a measure concluding the comprehensive collectivization of the Czechoslovak economy and culture.<sup>103</sup> The *Fond* was established in 1954 following an Act issued the same year.<sup>104</sup> Ideologically the *Fond* was directed by the *Central Union of Czechoslovak Visual Artists* founded in 1951.<sup>105</sup> As a cultural and economic institution, however, the *Fond* was run directly by the Czechoslovak Ministry of Culture. Established apparently on the lines conceived in the *Memorandum* of 1947, The *Fond* functioned as a managerial and welfare institution, loan-agency, and employment agency mediating orders for artists in various stages of their careers or career-situations. After its establishment the *Fond* held also, via its sale organization called *Dílo* (Art Work), a monopoly on sale of works of visual art, and services pertaining to such sales. Establishment of this kind of organization was proposed in the *Memorandum* of 1947 as well, though not as a part of the *Fond*.

CONTROL The *Fond* de facto nationalized, and centralized, the art sale institutions in the country, and monopolized the welfare activities of the former artist associations. This allowed the new Communist regime an almost absolute degree of control over both production and distribution of art. The regime controlled not only the ideological content of the works of art offered for distribution through the *Fond*'s *Dílo*-shops, since what was offered was subject to approval process of the *Fond*'s Art Boards (for this term, see below). Through the *Fond* the regime was now in a position to control also incomes of the artists able and willing to produce the works the regime wanted, and in this way also the number of those allowed the privilege of living off their freelance activity.

THE PRIVILEGE OF FREELANCING To begin with, only graduates of AVU - *Akademie výtvarných umění* (The Academy of Fine Arts, in Prague) or VS UMPRUM - *Vysoká škola uměleckoprůmyslová* (The College of Applied Arts, in Prague) were allowed to become members of the Central Union of Czech Visual Artists. Membership gave the graduates rights to take full part in the contemporary artistic life including competition for the most remunerative orders and commissions.<sup>106</sup> The membership entitled at the same time to the privilege of freelance way of work

<sup>103</sup> I base the following text - unless stated otherwise - largely on an anonymous and undated manuscript of 18 pages called *CFVU a vyvoj jeho hospodářských zařízení v letech 1954-1990* which is in the following referred to as *Fond-history overview*. The overview traces the development of Fond and its economic institutions between 1954 and 1992. It was written for the new post-1990 organization of Czech artists called *Nadace výtvarných umělců* in Prague, probably in 1995. Unfortunately, the text gives no reference either to sources or to literature on the subject, except for numbers of law Acts.

I received a copy of the text by the courtesy of the present director of the *Nadace*, Mrs. Dagmar Baberádová.

<sup>104</sup> The *Fond-history overview* does not specify the name or number of this particular Act. I was not yet able to find out which Act it was, and cannot therefore describe its content.

<sup>105</sup> This according to the *Fond-history overview*. According to the same source, what replaced the disbanded artist associations was the *Central Union of Czechoslovak Visual Artists* (*Ústřední svaz československých výtvarných umělců*) established in 1951. The 1995 *Nova Encyklopedie* (Horová, ed.), however, claims in the entry "spolky" that the *Central Union of Czechoslovak Visual Artists* was a new name given at a 1952 member congress to the former *Union of Czechoslovak Visual artists* (*Svaz Československých výtvarných umělců* - SCSVU) created in 1948; this Union is said to have been created as a merger of several trade organizations of artists and architects. Neither the *Fond-history overview* nor the *Nova Encyklopedie*'s entry on "spolky" mentions, however, the *Central Bloc of Visual Artists of the Czechoslovak Republic* or the *Memorandum* which the *Bloc* published in 1947.

<sup>106</sup> Membership of the Union was not only the gate to a somewhat normal life as an artist; as already mentioned, it opened at the same time one of very few roads to a standard of living in the Communist Czechoslovakia than rank and file citizens could only dream of. Of course, the best paid commissions went practically always to the high functionaries in the artist institutions. According to the guess of one of my sources, in the 1980s there sat some 50 people in the key positions in various Art Boards and practically controlled the art scene. As members of the Communist Party with important positions in the Union of visual artists, they had the best access to the most remunerative commissions, and seemed no longer interested in small catch. As a consequence (according

on the one hand, and to the *Fond's* facilities and welfare on the other. The right to freelance was probably the greatest privilege of the artistic existence in the Communist Czechoslovakia (and probably elsewhere in the Communist bloc), quite independently of whether one's artistic production led to no more than a mediocre income or to wealth. This was so because the right to freelance was in many ways the only palpable freedom left from the former democratic regime, and as such it was a privilege absolutely out of the reach for *all other* citizens.<sup>107</sup>

The background for the enormous value put by many on the right to freelance was this: When the Communist regime introduced the *right to work* for every of its citizens, the other side of this the new coin was the *work duty*, i.e. an obligation for every citizen to have an employer.<sup>108</sup> Except for the organized artists<sup>109</sup> practically everybody<sup>110</sup> was legally bound to have an employment, and to prove it whenever necessary by presenting a rubber stamp in the citizen card [“obcanska legitimace”].<sup>111</sup> At a later date not only members of the Central Union of Czech Visual Artists (i.e. the graduates of the two academic level art schools, AVU and VS UMPRUM) but also graduates of the lower level art schools, could be granted the privilege to freelance, if they succeeded in obtaining what was called *registration* at the *Fond*.<sup>112</sup> The prerogatives of such registrerees were, however, limited to the right of exhibiting and of selling their works; they were not entitled to enjoy other rights of the members of the central Union enjoyed, such as ample scholarships, working stays at the *Fond's* facilities, pension agreements, and various forms for support and welfare.<sup>113</sup>

TOWARDS COLLECTIVIZATION: THE GUILDS Already in the inter-war period of 1918-1939 the associations of Czechoslovak artists, although ideologically independent, had very much of

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to the same source) a price-tag on a commission of up to 160.000 Kcs did not attract the interest of the Art Board members, and had a chance to pass without any. Sated as they seemed to be, the Board heads sometimes acted with a broadmindedness of millionaires which they indeed often were. A Prague artist related to me a story of his having his art work and its price-tag approved by an Art Board in Hradec Kralove, a large town in Western part of Bohemia. The head of the Art Board incidentally asked the artist about the place of his birth and when the artist answered that he was born in Hradec Kralove, the head of the Board, obviously of patriotic reasons, gave order to his secretary: “Add ten thousand more to the price!”

<sup>107</sup> Texler 1996, 98 writes in connection with the gray-zone economic activity: “*It is well known what prestige the freelance status enjoyed* [in the Socialist countries].”

<sup>108</sup> That the work duty was a logical consequence, a corollary, of the Communist idea of the right to work (i.e. right to existence) was showed persuasively already in the inter-war period by the Karel Engliš in many of his books where what he called the *solidarist economic system* (i.e. Communism) was discussed. As far as I know, only two of these books have been translated into English: his “*German Socialism*” as *Programme of the Sudete German Party*, 1938; and *An essay on economic systems*, 1986. The latter one is a translation of Engliš’ *Hospodarské soustavy*, 1946); here see esp. 44-46. For a broader discussion of the logic of the ‘solidarist’ system, see his magnum opus *Soustava národního hospodářství*, 1938, esp. 22-23. For the notion of “pracovní povinnost” and “pracovní právo” (work duty, right to work) in a historical context, see these entries in Kolarík, *Priruční slovník politický a hospodarský*, 1939(?). Cf. also a recent publication in Czech: Vencovsky, Karel Engliš, 1993, esp. 109-110.

<sup>109</sup> I.e. those who were members of the Central Union or who were registered with the Fond.

<sup>110</sup> After 15 years of age, the exception being students as long they were registered as ones, and married women who had a right to stay at home (*v domácnosti*). This clause made it easier for women-artists later in Gustav Husák’s “normalization period” after the 1968, to continue to work as artists without having to have an employer, even after their right to enjoy the Fond facilities was taken from them.

<sup>111</sup> This was an item always checked for by the police at the identity checks everybody was from time to time exposed to on various occasions. Those who failed to give evidence of their employee status were considered idlers, which was a criminal offence punishable by prison terms.

<sup>112</sup> I was not able to find out when this possibility was introduced. To become registered with the Fond was not an easy affair, though; there was a special Fond Commission which dealt with the applications. These had to have a recommendation from a person who already was a member of the Central Union.

<sup>113</sup> Here I am somewhat uncertain as to the entitlements of the artists who had the status of only *registered* with the Fond, without being full members of the Central Union.

a guild character, which probably made the after-war collectivization of artistic life easier. Also in that period one could take part in a full-fledged artistic life only after one had completed the AVU or the VS UMPRUM. Still the free market economy of the inter-war period and absence of state regulations of artistic life allowed also those who had no accepted artistic schooling and consequently were not members of the artist associations, to live of their art activities - though not in the category of culturally respected artists. Those with the proper schooling were expected to become a part of one of several artist associations, which concentrated mainly on organizing regular member exhibitions. The most important among these was *S.V.U Mánes* (Association of Visual Artists MÁNES), *Umelecka Beseda* (Art Club), and *SG Hollar* (Association of Graphic Artists HOLLAR). A respectable artistic existence outside such artist associations was practically impossible; membership was all the more imperative due to the fact that key members of the leading associations were since 1930s and in 1940s often at the same time professors at AVU or VS UMPRUM (or both?) and members of Art Purchase Boards attached to various Ministries and to Modern Gallery.<sup>114</sup>

What apparently made the soon-to-come collectivization of the art life still easier was the Leftist radicalization of the artistic community after the Second World War. The Communist Party, due to its anti-nazi resistance record as well as its close connection with the victorious Soviet Union whose army liberated most of the Czechoslovak territory from the Nazi occupation, came out of the Second World War with huge political prestige, which resulted in great election success in the first elections after the war. Besides, reactions to the two key exhibition arranged in 1947, shortly before the Communist take-over in February next year, one of the Soviet art (Socialist Realism) and the other of American Art, showed a marked preponderance of the leading figures in the artist associations towards the Soviet artistic visions. When the new Communist administrators of culture started their reshaping of artistic life after the 1948-coup, there was hardly any resistance - on the contrary, some of the associations were said to have disbanded themselves voluntarily.<sup>115</sup>

**ART BOARDS** The key element in the control and management of the art scene in the Communist regime In Czechoslovakia was the institution of ART BOARDS [*“Umelecke komise”*]. The task of the Art Boards was specifically and explicitly stated in the third part (§ 6–9) of the Decree 149/1961. According to §9:1 of the Decree the term Art Board referred to visual art councils [*“vytvarne rady”*] of various enterprises, factories and other institutions, purchase committees of art institutions, competition juries and similar committees whose task was to evaluate works of visual art to be used as public works of art or about to be produced industrially. Among important points concerning the composition and task of the Boards should be mentioned that the Head of the Board was normally to be a representative of an Art Union (i.e. of visual artists or architects), that the Board should give an objective evaluation of the ideological [*“ideovy”*] and artistic level of the work, and that evaluate the propriety of the fee demanded by the artist for the work. The Board’s task included also categorization of the work with regard to the taxation (i.e. what category of percent deduction the work was entitled to). The Board was among other things (149/1961 § 8:3) obliged to keep and file written reports which included *“clear and reasoned conclusion as to the ideological and artistic level/standard of the work in question, about the reasonableness of the demanded fee, or its suggested changes, about the manner of taxation [“způsobu zdanení”]...”* etc. It demanded also that *“the records be kept properly and well arranged.”*<sup>116</sup> The Act 149/1961 specified which persons or institutions were allowed to exhibit works of art, and determined among other things that *“Without the permission of the Ministry of Education and Culture no exhibition of the works of visual art can be either sent*

<sup>114</sup> This is a claim I take over from the Fond-history overview, 1. It is an unconfirmed claim.

<sup>115</sup> According to another unconfirmed claim from Fond history-overview p.1.

<sup>116</sup> According to one source, most of the Fond archives were, shockingly enough, destroyed in the early 1990. I was not able to verify this information, and have no idea what type of materials has been spared, if any. If the information about the wholesale destruction of the Fond archives is really true, the very speed with which it was executed not only raises suspicion about cover-up motives, but makes it all the more imperative to unearth information about the activities of the former Fond from the earlier Fond employees as well as from the artists who had dealings with the institution.

*abroad, or accepted from abroad.*” (§ 13:2) The Art Boards had in other words a whole gamut of measures at their disposal through which to control and direct the production of works of art. Among these measures, the Board’s right to approve the prices the artist put on his art work, and its right not to allow a work for sale at all, were among the most devastating of the measures.

## 9. The exports: Art Centrum

The Communist regime opened for institutionally backed sales of art works at foreign markets only in the 1960s. A special institution called (in Czech) *ART CENTRUM* was established for this purpose, with monopoly rights for conducting such export operations to the Capitalist West, and sometimes to the Third World countries. Since in the Communist regime all contact with foreign countries were considered an extremely serious business and as such were closely monitored, in great part due to the spy paranoia cultivated by the regime, the new organization was not run by the *Fond* like its sale organization *Dilo*, but was in the jurisdiction of a ministry - the *Ministry of Foreign Trade*<sup>117</sup> (which was known for being also in the business of foreign intelligence operations). This suggested both its importance, and the fact that it was after all considered a predominantly commercial organization.<sup>118</sup> It is probably right to consider the establishment of *Art Centrum* as a part of the growing ideological thaw in the Eastern Block that characterized the 1960s, and which in Czechoslovak case ended with the invasion of the Warsaw Pact armies into Czechoslovakia in August 1968.<sup>119</sup> *Art Centrum* was an unheard-of institution in a Communist regime; as an artist put it, “suddenly it was there, and everybody was amazed.”

The uniqueness of the *Art Centrum* lay not only in the fact that it provided an institutional opening for sales of an artist's work in the West. This in itself, due to the already mentioned very favorable exchange rates, implied incomes several times higher than those one could get for single works of art inside the country. The *Art Centrum* had also the power to acquire, on the artist's behalf, a temporary permission for him or her to leave the country in order to be present at the artist's own exhibition abroad or sometimes even for a work stay there. This was at a time when to obtain such permission was very laborious, and in addition always uncertain since the process of granting of

<sup>117</sup> This information comes from the Fond-history overview. This document also states that *Art Centrum* was operative since 1966 until 1991 (p. 10). For the troubles with obtaining information about *Art Centrum*, see [Appendix I](#), below.

<sup>118</sup> An entry in a Czechoslovak encyclopedia published in 1980 describes it, under heading *Art Centrum* as “Czechoslovak center for visual arts; it deals above all with export and import of originals of works of visual arts, with export of scenographic art, [and] ready-made exhibitions.” Cf. *Ilustrovaný encyklopedický slovník: (a–i)*, 1980, 122.

<sup>119</sup> The thaw began slowly after the 20th congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union in February 1956. Here Stalin's homicidal treatment of members of his own Communist Party was for the first time officially (though secretly) denounced, under the Marxist rubric of the “cult of personality”. The notion of the *cult of personality*, launched by Khrushchev, is interesting in our context since it reflected the orthodox Marxist theory of historical materialism, which had a very particular view of the “role of the personality in history”. According to this theory, historically important figures were seen as expressions of the intrinsic ‘character’ of the epoch rather than autonomous individual forces shaping that epoch. The crimes of Stalin were therefore interpreted as a result of his failure to conform to the theory of historical materialism: by making himself the sole player he departed from the role ascribed to him by History; he was meant to be a part of collective leadership.

The same theory was also at the base of the Communist art theory: artists should express the character of the epoch, rather than pursue ideas or ideals of their own. Once the character of the epoch was determined as Socialist, the content of the artist's art was to be collectivist rather than individualist.

But just as relation between the “base” and “superstructure” was claimed to be “dialectical”, i.e. not a “mechanical” process of cause and effect, so was also the relation of the needs of the epoch to the figure of the leader (or artist). The leader (or the artist) did not only expressed the nature of the Socialist epoch but also formed and reinforced the new epoch. The allegedly right interpretation of this relation could be settled only by a fiat, or force. That was what Stalin did, in all areas of social life, whether political, economic or artistic. In other words, the practical application of theory of historical materialism seems to have been *bound* to end in dictatorship of one individual. The “cult of personality”, an euphemism for Communist despotism, seems not a deplorable departure from the rule but an embodiment of the rule itself.

For an early seminal Marxist treatment of the problem, cf. the classic essay *The Role of the Individual in History*, 1940 (1898) by Plekhanov. Cf. also Bullock et al., *The Fontana Dictionary of Modern*, 1988, entry “personality cult”.

permissions by the police authorities followed no known rules. The Socialist citizens had no legal entitlement to leave the country,<sup>120</sup> even temporarily, and the process of granting such permission was consequently felt to be, and indeed was, a largely arbitrary affair.

In its beginnings the *Art Centrum* is said to have been no more than an office in the center of Prague, with several rooms and some 5 plus employees.<sup>121</sup> Later the number of employees grew as the *Art Centrum* branched into several departments, each serving its own category of art.

Any type of contemporary art for which there was a demand in the West was permitted to be exported. The exception would be of course the kind of art that could be deemed explicitly anti-Communist. The commercial dealings could be initiated either by artists themselves (after they had made their own private arrangements for an exhibition, or a sale or a commission abroad) or by the functionaries of the *Art Centrum*. Their power to make or break often exceedingly lucrative deals for artists, and to obtain permissions to spend some time in the West, gave the functionaries a substantial control over the artists, which probably led to various forms of pecuniary wooing from the artists' side. Although the artists had to pay a commission to the *Art Centrum* from the incomes earned through its mediation (which was probably fairly high, maybe between 20% and 30%) it was still highly advantageous for the artists since their incomes in Western currency were, as already mentioned, converted to Czechoslovak currency at very advantageous rates.

(End note: Due to serious problems with obtaining information on the *Art Centrum* institution, this chapter is more unfinished than the previous ones. For the comment on my failure to acquire the information, see "Appendix 1: The ART CENTRUM questions", below.)

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<sup>120</sup> The very fact that the Socialist experiment had to be performed on *captive audience* is a telling comment on the nature of the fully Socialist regime. In the strike days of November 1989 in Prague, when the Communist regime was in free fall, one slogan of those days, more than any other, summarized that general feeling of the essential perversity of the collectivist vision. The slogan read: "COMMUNISM TO COMMUNISTS!"

<sup>121</sup> In 1967 the Centrum was located in *V jáme*-street in Prague.



## Appendix I: The Art Centrum questionnaire

Obtaining information on the *Art Centrum* institution was made especially difficult because the knowledgeable persons I came into contact with tended to be suspicious of the purpose of my inquiry. Close friends in Prague were all the time needed to act as middlemen to recommend me, arrange a meeting, and often be present there. This did help to dispel a possible suspicion that I was perhaps some sort of a crypto-Communist, or that the whole business was rather fishy, but the resulting factual information is still somewhat meager.

Since this dependence on other people was in the long run rather demanding for both parties, I chose to make a list of questions about *Art Centrum* (see the questionnaire in this Appendix, below). This did not turn out to be a great intelligence success. I gave the list to a former student colleague from the university studies who is now a rather prestigious figure in the Czech theatre world, and who was kind enough to offer help. He promised to contact the people whom he knew had worked for, or in, the *Art Centrum*, either as officials or as artists. For his part he considered the questionnaire unproblematic, and was taken aback by the overwhelmingly negative reaction to it on the part of the Art Centrum people.

Admittedly, when formulating the questions, I thought mainly about making them as straightforward and pointed as possible, ignoring any diplomatic considerations. As a result the questionnaire probably read like a police interrogation checklist, and the officials contacted refused to answer the questions. One of the former *Art Centrum* employees, after having given signs of willingness to cooperate, in the end declined and left a message that he valued his answers to Kč 500.000,- (approx. 18,000 US-dollars). The artists who worked for, or through, the *Art Center* declined as well. It was suggested to me that some of the well-known dissident artists worked through the *Centrum* under cover of their friends' names, and there was fear that if this became known it would compromise the artists in question.<sup>122</sup>

At any rate, it seems that in-person contact with those in the know is all the same the only way to learn more about various areas of the present projects.

Here follows the English translation of my Czech questionnaire, used in my abortive attempt to get written answers to some basic queries about the *Art Centrum* institution.

- Since when - and how long - did ART CENTRUM (AC) exist?
- Is it known
  - where did the initiative for AC establishment come from?
  - who were the persons who came with the initiative?
- Was the establishment of AC grounded in an Act or a Decree issued by the Parliament?
  - is it known what Act or decree number it was?
- What was the *officially formulated* aim of the AC?

<sup>122</sup> In the period after 1968 it was not unusual that those who were forbidden to publish or/and live by their art, sometimes managed to publish books or translations or get art commissions under their friends' names, or under aliases. There were certainly many such cases; I have known myself of two of them. The Prague art historian Dr. Roman Prahl who as a consequence of marrying a daughter of a central "Prague Spring" politician, had his art historical career thwarted, did manage to publish a book on *Současná monumentální tvorba* ([Contemporary Monumental Art] (1978) in the prestigious Odeon publishing house in Prague under the alias of Pavla Dvorská, of course with the knowledge of the Odeon editor. The poet and translator Ludvík Kundera published in 1973 his excellent Czech translations of poems of the German Johannes Becher in a book where my father, professor of German and Scandinavian literature and languages was given as translator (Becher, *Bily zazrak*, 1973). For a book discussing this undercover practice in the period between 1970 and 1989, and providing names of the true translators, see Pridal, *Zamlcovani prekladatele* [Covert Translators], 1992.

- Was there any radical reorganization of AC during its existence?
- Was AC a part of the Ministry of Foreign Trade?
- How many employees did AC have?
- Were there any internal departments within AC?
- When did the AC activity ceased?
- Was there only one AC or was there several centers in other cities as well?
- Did Slovakia have its own similar organization? What was its official name? Was it in Bratislava?
- Were the Czech and the Slovak organizations (if both existed) independent of each other?
- If AC still exists today
  - what is its present form?
  - what is its present name?
  - what is its official aim?
  - in what ways does it differ from the AC of the past?
- AC was known as (1) an exporter of contemporary Czech art; (2) as an agency which mediated art commissions abroad.
  - can the AC activity be characterized this way?
  - was AC engaged in export activities only or in import as well?
  - did AC mediated work of Czech scenographers and theatre directors abroad as well?
  - Did AC engaged in other activities as well (such as export of antiquities, or weapons)?
- Which categories of contemporary visual art were included in the export activities of AC?
- Which categories of visual art commissions were included?
- Were there any written set of articles, a memorandum, constitution or a rule book which specified the tasks and activities of AC?
  - is it possible to get hold of such a document (documents)?
- In what way did AC work with Czech artists?
  - were the artists contacted by AC according to the Centrum's own judgement?
  - could the artists approach the center and ask for mediation?
  - had AC its own art board?
  - if it had, who determined its composition? Was it the *Fond*?
- Did the artists received their income
  - in Czech currency (was it always so or only in a certain period, or until a certain period)?
  - in Tuzex currency (was it always so or only in a certain period, or until a certain period)?
  - in Western currency (was it always so or only in a certain period, or until a certain period)?

- How large a percent fee took the AC off the artist's income?
    - was this percent fee the same as in the case of sale of art works via *Fond's Dílo*, or was it higher?
  - Could artists own their own *Tuzex currency* bank account?
    - since when?
  - Could artists own their own *foreign currency* bank account?
    - since when?
- (Was *Tuzex* also, just as AC, a part of the Ministry of Foreign Trade?)  
 (Was *Artia* also a part of the Ministry of Foreign Trade?)
- When did Czech artists participated in the art designs for the Iranian Shah?
    - was this action really mediated and coordinated by AC?
    - what did the artists provide to do for the Shah (short item-list)
    - how many Czech artists took part in the action?
    - how many artists worked directly in Iran?
    - who among the better known artists were among those who participated in the action?
  - Were Party members better chances to sell artworks abroad, or acquire commissions from abroad ?
  - Or would it be right to say that the commercial consideration rather than the ideological ones had the upper hand?
  - In 1982-84 AC reportedly initiated a project called "Meridian" where selected artists were contracted to deliver art works for approx. \$50.000 per year. The aim was allegedly to provide a foreign client/clients with furnishing for luxurious houses which the foreign client made business with.
    - are these informations right? Can they be made more precise?

## ***Appendix II: Text of the initial (1993) project description***

### ***1. The background and importance of the problem to be addressed***

**The current climate favors certain types of questions.** The current political and cultural climate in the Czech republic has been conducive in bringing to light suppressed art personalities and achievements. These had originally emerged either in direct opposition to cultural and political values of the previous Communist regime or were, at the least, conceived outside the institutional cultural framework of the former Socialist state. Generally, there has been an (understandable) tendency to stress that all artistic triumphs produced under the Communist regime were achieved in spite of - rather than due to - that regime or its institutions.

**The question of institutional framework** For anyone who has a personal experience of that period, it is not difficult to agree with such conclusions. All the same, even if the achievements of individual artists should be seen as the ultimate key to every artistic accomplishment of the period, it is still reasonable to presume that the institutional framework established by the Communist regime was not just a hinder to the artistic achievement of the period. There were many thriving art forms in former Czechoslovakia, such as theatre, classical music, films for children, graphic design, glass art, and applied arts in general. In spite of all the difficulties, the results were achieved not outside but inside the Socialist institutional framework; and in many cases the framework may have been a decisive condition for the quality of those results.

By the framework I mean here the various mechanisms which were either devised by the former regime or in some cases perhaps inherited and left in place, in order to advance the work of the artist as propagandist for the Communist social order. In exchange for this service the Communist regime offered to patronize the artist, thus shielding him from insecurities of working for an impersonal art market. Various traits of this framework, such as the 3% taxes for writers and artists or those (in hindsight) liberal rules for use of glass factory facilities by glass artists, belong here, among many others. These features may all be seen as various aspects of patronage designed to operate beyond the market mechanisms.

**The aim of the project.** The present project aims at examination of the institutional framework established by the former Communist state around art production, with special attention to those aspects of the framework which had contributed to the success of the areas mentioned above. I intend to focus particularly on applied arts, and plan to single out the area of modern art glass for an even closer examination. The conjectures and hypotheses suggested below will be all the time confronted with the new insights into the making of the institutional framework.

I am, however, not quite sure of how much work the exploration of the institutional structure around applied arts entails, and neither am I certain of how many other art areas it will be necessary or reasonable to take into account. Consequently it is not clear to me how much of the ground can be covered in the six full-time working months I apply for, and whether there will be any time left at all for the more theoretical explorations, indicated below.

In view of these uncertainties, my minimal aim is to present a report outlining the principal elements of the institutional structure around applied arts in former Czechoslovakia, with some excursions into areas other than that of applied arts. I see the six months research I seek support for, as the first round of the project, presuming one or two more rounds to be needed.

**A note.** A comment may be necessary here on the nature of this project. To draw attention to *beneficial* aspects and achievements of the institutional framework around successful art forms of the former regime, may be mistaken for an attempt to commend the former Communist regime, or at least its cultural policy. The aim of the project, however, is neither to commend nor to condemn the former regime or its policy; but to gain insight into a particular institutional context in a particular historical situation in which outstanding works of art happened to be produced. The project proposes to approach the problem in an academic, non-partisan spirit, and let the chips fall where they may. From

that perspective, the exploration of the institutional dimension behind artistic achievements of the Communist period will appear not only a legitimate, but in many ways also a thrilling, art historical undertaking.

## 2. Ideas and hypotheses

Here follow sketches of some ideas, conjectures and hypotheses that have inspired this project. I am aware that they are in need of intercourse with first-hand knowledge of the concrete institutional structures - something that this project is designed to produce.

**Failure of industrial design** The one area where the Communist visual culture was fairly unsuccessful in spite of numerous well-educated and talented designers in that field was the area of industrial design. Although many interesting ideas were conceived and many prototypes were developed in that period, the Czechoslovak industry apparently lacked incentives which would spur the producers to develop first class consumer products. With very few exceptions, the Czech industrial design never reached the standards achieved by Western manufacturers. If we see Western industrial design as a product of a profit-oriented, competition-based market economy, then the poor results were hardly surprising. The Socialist system was built on visions of 'production for use' as opposed to 'production for profit' and, for that purpose, market mechanisms were intentionally abandoned and competition abolished. In replacing economic competition with planned economy the Communist regime seemed to have stricken at the very center of the industrial system. In a sense, the Communist society was pushed back to a pre-industrial situation. No wonder that quality of industrial design was in most cases mediocre.

**Success of pre-industrial arts** It may be more than a coincidence that the art forms that flourished under the former regime, and which could easily be measured with the best of that which was produced elsewhere in the West, such as music, theatre, film, graphic design or glass art, were basically products of pre-industrial origin, either in their production techniques or in their organization, or both. (The film art may on the face of it seem to be a stranger in this group but on closer inspection the film production resembles more the medieval *Bauhütte* of cathedral builders than industrial processes.) Several questions appear in this context: Did the Socialist patronizing of arts prove beneficial to these pre-industrial art forms because Socialism itself was a pre-industrial vision? Or can perhaps some of the artistic achievements of the former regime (e.g. art glass of the 1970s) be best understood as results of a subtle misappropriation of patronage? And can the pre-industrial arts manage in a free-market situation without one form of patronage or another?

**Sacrosanct status of art in Marxism** Although the practical propagandist impulse behind the institutional structure around art production was probably very strong, there seems to have been another dimension to this massive commitment of the Communist regime to art. Here I think of the extraordinary status of art in the Marxist philosophy - a feature apparently inherited from the German 'classical' philosophy where art was finally established as a philosophical subject. The high status of art in Marxism put the artist in a class entirely of his own. This may throw some light on the question of why artists in Marxist states were never seen for what they obviously were, namely entrepreneurs of sorts, and - if we accept such designation - why they were the only entrepreneurs left to operate in peace. The sacrosanct status of art and the exalted status of the artist is of course not particular to Marxism only. It has become an abiding characteristic for most of Western societies, but probably nowhere has it been more pronounced than in the Marxist regimes and their institutional structures around art production. The fact that Czechoslovakia and other Socialist countries did remarkably well in the spheres of non-industrial art, should therefore be seen also in connection with the traditional Marxist exemption of the artistic activity from the definition of private enterprise.

### 3. & 4. *Methods & Materials*

Firstly, I plan to study literature on the subject. Most of this can be done while still staying in Norway.

Then, during my planned six stays in the Czech Republic I intend to find and interview people willing to share their knowledge and insight into the project's theme. Here I think of people in former administrative positions within artistic organizations, agencies and art institutions, including art schools, as well as successful artists, in Prague and possibly also in Brno and Bratislava. I intend also to visit some of the factories at localities outside Prague, with which these artists were affiliated. At the same time I will attempt to track down the internal printed materials pertaining to the theme of the project such as rules and regulations of various artistic organizations, and what has been published about the project-related issues in the press, and in literature in former Czechoslovakia.

### 5. *Originality of the proposed study. Bibliography*

As far as I am aware the problem as stated above under 1. has been neither formulated in this way before nor has the material been researched with such a problem in mind. My knowledge of the literature on the subject is, however, rather incomplete. Since this is an exemplary post-1989 problem, the literature on the subject, if any, must be very recent. Still, much in the climate of post-Communist states speaks against posing this kind of questions.

Some information and ideas bearing upon the problem can probably be found in Groys 1992, and Haraszti 1987. Below follow some further titles related, or presumed to be related, to the proposed study.

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